

A.J. Davis. View of Pavilion at Montgomery Place. Avery Library (1955.001.012).

PICTURESQUE TRANSFORMATIONS:  
A.J. DAVIS IN THE HUDSON VALLEY AND BEYOND

Peter Watson

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree  
Master of Science in Historic Preservation

Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation  
Columbia University

May, 2012

## CONTENTS

i	Acknowledgements
ii	A Note on the Sources
1	<b>Introduction</b>
13	<b>Chapter 1</b> <i>The Affinity of the Arts and the Education of A.J. Davis</i>
23	<b>Chapter 2</b> <i>A.J. Davis and the English Landscape Gardening Tradition</i>
54	<b>Chapter 3</b> <i>Picturesque Transformations: Blithewood (1836-50)</i>
79	<b>Chapter 4</b> <i>Picturesque Transformations: The Dr. Oliver Bronson House (1839-49)</i>
103	<b>Chapter 5</b> <i>Picturesque Transformations: Montgomery Place (1841-1873)</i>
127	<b>Chapter 6</b> <i>Picturesque Transformations: Locust Grove (1851-52)</i>
150	<b>Chapter 7:</b> <i>Picturesque: Transformations: Contemporary Preservation Issues</i>
176	Picturesque Transformation Checklist
178	A.J. Davis Career Timeline
183	Bibliography

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Large research projects like this study are the work of multiple hands and eyes. I have been very fortunate to have worked with an extremely talented group of individuals who have offered steady encouragement and ideas, led me back on track when I got mired in the weeds of diverting details and unpromising arguments, and generally helped to make this project happen.

I want to thank my Thesis Advisor Professor Andrew Dolkart who has given me excellent counsel throughout the year, allowing the research to guide the overall argument organically, and tirelessly editing chapter drafts with peculiar spelling and capitalization occasioned by my reading of too many eighteenth century English texts.

I wish to thank Alan Neumann, who has been a champion of this project even before it began, sending me books, introducing me to Davis's world along the middle stretch Hudson River and offering many suggestions and articles along the way.

To Janet Parks, I owe a major debt of gratitude for helping me navigate the shoals of the vast and unwieldy A.J. Davis archives and offering many helpful suggestions on articles to read.

Special thanks also are due to Jason Escalante at Avery Drawings and Tal Nadan at the New York Public Library for assisting me with many research requests over the past nine months.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife Stephanie whose support and love has made all of this possible.

## A NOTE ON THE SOURCES

This study relies heavily on original A.J. Davis drawings and correspondence contained in archival collections at four New York-based cultural institutions. References (**in bold**) to these organizations in the text and images accompanying this study are as follows:

Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library at Columbia University in the City of New York (**Avery**)

Metropolitan Museum of Art Drawing & Print Collection (**MMA**)

New-York Historical Society Drawing Collection (**N-YHS**)

New York Public Library Manuscripts & Archives Division (**NYPL**)

Another primary source for this study are Davis' diaries and journals, which provide an invaluable daily record of his projects, client visits, and book purchases. Davis's diary, which he and all subsequent scholars have referred to as the "Day Book," provides a daily record of his activities from 1828 to 1869. The Day Book has been preserved in two volumes that will be cited in the text as follows:

A.J. Davis Day Book, Volume 1 (Feb 1828-Sept 1853), New York Public Library Manuscripts & Archives Division (**Day Book, Vol. 1**)

A.J. Davis Day Book, Volume 2 (Oct 1853- Dec 1869), Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library at Columbia University in the City of New York (**Day Book, Vol. 2**)

In addition to the Day Book, Davis also maintained an "office Journal," which recorded billings, payments, and project milestones. For many of his projects in the office Journal, Davis also created small watercolor or ink drawings recording the primary elevation and floorplans. These provide an important record for many projects for which are otherwise undocumented by surviving drawings. Some care needs to be taken in interpreting this source, however, since many of the drawings in the office Journal were created by Davis during his retirement years many years after their completion. Citations in this study to the office Journal will be as follows:

A.J. Davis office Journal (Dec 1828 – Sept 1891), Metropolitan Museum of Art (**office Journal**)

## **Introduction**

## Introduction

Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-92) is a familiar but somewhat elusive figure in American architecture. He has been the subject of major historical surveys such as William H. Pierson's *American Buildings and Their Architects: Technology and the Picturesque, the Corporate and the Early Gothic Styles* (1978) and, more recently, W. Barksdale Maynard's *Architecture in the United States 1800-1850* (2002). Davis was also featured in an extensive exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1992. Yet, much is not known and understood about his work. One of the key unresolved issues in the existing scholarship is nailing down the role of the English landscape tradition of the Picturesque in Davis's work. There are abundant clues that the topic was extremely important to him. Scholars have long pointed to Davis's criticism of the typical American house's "want of connexion with its site" and lack of "well disposed trees, shrubbery and vines"<sup>1</sup> Others authors have noted Davis's reading of English landscape gardening books during the formative years of his career.<sup>2</sup> And numerous writers have celebrated Davis's fruitful collaboration with Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852) during the 1840s in adapting the English picturesque aesthetic to American country house design. But no sustained attempt has been made to understand how Davis was introduced to the vast and complicated English landscape tradition, what he learned from it, how it entered into his working methods, and how it is evident in his work.

Recently, I came across a series of newspaper advertisements, dating to the late period of Davis's career after the Civil War, in which Davis prominently lists

---

<sup>1</sup> A.J. Davis, quoted in Jane B. Davies, "Alexander Jackson Davis: Creative American Architect" in *Alexander Jackson Davis: American Architect 1803-1892* (New York: Rizzoli Intl, 1992), Amelia Peck, ed., 14.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Susanne Brendel-Pandich cites the importance of Davis's reading of the major English treatises on landscape gardening and picturesque aesthetic theory. Peck, 60.

“landscape gardening” as one of the professional services he offers to the public (figure 0.1). It is one thing to contemplate Davis sitting in his study reading English books on landscape gardening, it is quite another to picture him *practicing* the art of English-style landscape gardening. And yet, the more I have studied Davis, the more I believe that is exactly what he was doing in many of his most important commissions over his long career. Seeing Davis through the lense of English landscape gardening substantially changes our understanding of how he saw himself and the way in which one “reads” his watercolor drawings. More importantly, it changes how Davis’s surviving body of work, much of it located in New York’s Hudson Valley, should be preserved and interpreted. It is these two primary themes, understanding what Davis learned from English landscaping gardening and relating this to contemporary preservation efforts that form the dual goals of the present study.

### **Surviving Davis Work in the Hudson Valley**

A.J. Davis executed some of his most important residential commissions in New York’s Hudson Valley during the 1830s and 1840s. These country house projects were developed over extended periods into elaborate set pieces in which landscape and architecture were artfully blended into unified compositions full of varied individual “scenes” and “incidents.” A handful of these former country estates still exist and are the subject of ongoing preservation work. The basic historical significance of these sites is well established. Many are listed as National Historic Landmarks based on their association with A.J. Davis, the writer and landscape gardener Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), and the Romantic era in the Hudson Valley. Despite this, these sites are unevenly interpreted and the landscapes are unevenly restored. There are many gaps in our basic understanding of how they evolved, what they originally looked like, and what they meant to their owners. And no significant attention has been paid to understanding them as group and the interlocked webs of social

relationships in which they were created. Particularly problematic is understanding A.J. Davis's actual role in the creation of these landscapes.

This study is an attempt to bridge these gaps by providing a fresh interpretation of a group of four inter-related Hudson Valley projects (Blithewood, Dr. Oliver Bronson House, Montgomery Place, and Locust Grove) through a common intellectual framework: the English art of landscape gardening. My overall argument is that Davis's early exposure to the ideals of the English Picturesque and the practice of English landscape gardening played a fundamental role in shaping his identity as an artist and architect. It shaped his view of the possibilities of his chosen profession, it connected him to future clients and colleagues who were also inspired by this tradition, it provided him with his working methods, and it supplied him with many specific architectural ideas and patterns. Davis learned about English landscape gardening through his circle of Hudson River School artists and intellectuals, and through reading English books on the subject. Both sources of influence will be explored in detail in subsequent chapters.

### **Picturesque Transformations**

All of the projects analyzed in this study involve the redesign of an existing house and landscape into a radically different form. The specific mode of transformation in these projects itself has a long history in English landscape gardening that stretches back to the early eighteenth century. I am calling these projects "picturesque transformations" to reflect both their inspiration in the English Picturesque which was shared by both architect and clients alike, and the process of transformation that is integral to the practice of landscape gardening. These projects are not randomly chosen. Collectively, they served as Davis's laboratory for many of the architectural ideas he utilized over his entire career. They reflect sustained, often decades-long experiments that connect Davis'



earliest work as a country house architect to his mature architectural and landscape transformations of Llewellyn Park and Lyndhurst.

Since Davis was a visual artist, the primary means used to understand his projects are visual: close study of his surviving working drawings and sketches, supplemented by plates from the English books that are documented in his library, along with photographs of current site conditions. Many of the archival sources used in this study have not been published before. While Davis's beautiful watercolor drawings have long been admired, his rougher working drawings, many of which were created en-situ, provide more insight into his composition process.

### **Davis Scholarship Currently Available to Preservationists**

While Davis has long been acknowledged as an important figure in the history of American architecture, scholars have found him a difficult figure to categorize. He produced designs for virtually every type of architectural form (cottages, villas, universities, prisons, post offices, castles, parks,) in a variety of seemingly disparate architectural styles (Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Bracketed, Italianate). In a time when the profession of architecture was still in its infancy in America, Davis developed a unique working approach that crossed over the disciplines of painting, architecture, and landscape design, further complicating efforts to place him.

The current scholarship on Davis available to preservationists has been created in intermittent waves. As early as 1936, Edna Donnell pointed out Davis's critical role in launching the Gothic Revival in America.<sup>3</sup> In the 1940s, Talbot

---

<sup>3</sup> Edna Donnell, "A. J. Davis and the Gothic Revival," *Metropolitan Museum Studies* Vol. 5, No. 2 (September, 1936), 183-233.

Hamlin wrote about Town & Davis's work in popularizing the Greek Revival.<sup>4</sup> During the 1970s, the architectural historian William H. Pierson wrote elegant and incisive essays about Davis's work at Blithewood, Glenellen, and Knoll/Lyndhurst that added much to our understanding of these projects.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1980s, architectural and landscape historians have focused primarily on Davis's contributions to Andrew Jackson Downing's widely influential publications that defined not only the look of mid-nineteenth century American houses and gardens but inculcated a distinct moral philosophy of rural life.<sup>6</sup> The Davis scholar Jane B. Davies celebrated Davis and Downing as "collaborators in the picturesque" and highlighted their role in creating the first distinctly American popular architecture.<sup>7</sup> The last major scholarly contribution to understanding Davis's work was made in 1992 when Jane Davies and Amelia Peck, then Assistant Curator of Decorative arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, organized an important exhibition of Davis's original watercolor drawings

---

<sup>4</sup> Talbot F. Hamlin, *The Greek Revival in America: being an account of the important trends in American Architecture and American Life prior to the War between the States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944).

<sup>5</sup> See William H. Pierson, *American Buildings and Their Architects: Technology and the Picturesque, the Corporate and Early Gothic Styles* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980), 170-388.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Sweeting has described Andrew Jackson Downing and others of his generation as "genteel romantics" and connected Downing's writings to the larger tradition of the pre-Civil War literature of domestic sensibility. Adam Sweeting, *Reading Houses and Building Books: Andrew Jackson Downing and the Architecture of Popular Antebellum Literature, 1835-1855* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Janes B. Davies, "Davis and Downing: Collaborators in the Picturesque," in *Prophet with Honor: The Career of Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-52* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989), 81-123.

and an accompanying exhibition catalog with articles by leading scholars.<sup>8</sup> These essays added many pieces to the puzzle, documenting Davis's early involvement in the New York arts community and work as an interior designer at Grace Hill and Knoll.

But despite this scholarly attention, Davis remains somewhat "out-of-focus." His interests and projects seem too diverse to form a unified picture. There is not one A.J. Davis that emerges but many: the Davis who designed Greek Revival public buildings with Ithiel Town, the Davis who collaborated with Downing in creating picturesque cottages and villas, the Davis who designed universities and mental hospitals, the Davis who created castellated gothic mansions. One does not have a sense of the "how," of the core methods Davis applied across his highly diverse projects. More importantly, much of the scholarship, taken as a whole, is too general and too focused solely on the main house architecture to guide preservation decision-making for his surviving landscape designs in the Hudson Valley.

### **Interpreting the English Picturesque**

Alexander Jackson Davis's incredible virtuosity with his paintbrush and pencil was not matched by a similar skill with his pen. He was a reluctant and awkward writer, and has left us with few sustained accounts of his design philosophy.<sup>9</sup> His sometime collaborator Andrew Jackson Downing, on the other

---

<sup>8</sup> Amanda Peck, ed. *Alexander Jackson Davis, American Architect*. (New York: Rizzoli International Publishers), 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Davis's formal education ended at the age of fifteen after which he was apprenticed to his brother's print shop as a typesetter in Alexandria, Virginia. His early writings are full of grammatical errors. With time his writing improved but never developed the fluency of his drawing and painting. His writing retained a peculiar cadence and contained many idiosyncratic usages of words up until his death. This distracts from the fact that Davis was a serious intellectual and was extremely well read. The incredible range and depth of his

hand, was a wonderful writer, and Downing's magnetic personality comes through in his conversational prose. Because of this disparity, there is a strong tendency to view A.J. Davis's work through the lense of A.J. Downing's writings. Nowhere is this more the case than in understanding the role of the Picturesque in his work, a subject on which Downing literally wrote the book. Now largely forgotten, Downing's landmark "*A Treatise on the History and Theory of Landscape Gardening, adapted to North America* (1841) introduced middle class Americans of his generation to the English Picturesque. It was a hugely influential book, going through thirteen editions with reprintings into the 1920s. Downing subsequently repackaged sections and ideas from this book with minimal modification in all of his later writing including *Cottage Residences* (1842) *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850) and his popular journal *The Horticulturalist* (1846-1858). But while Downing's interpretation of the Picturesque became the definitive account for most mid-nineteenth century Americans, and the primary reference point for many modern historians, Davis had earlier developed his own independent interpretation of this English tradition that was substantially different in emphasis.

### **Two Different Readings of the Picturesque**

Downing's reading of the Picturesque was heavily based on the work of John Claudius Loudon (1783-1843), a Scottish landscape gardener and encyclopedist who was writing at a time when the active development of the English Picturesque was largely over, even if it had yet to begin in America. In early Victorian England when Loudon was writing, "the picturesque" was one of many styles available for designing suburban houses and gardens. And "landscape gardening" had become largely a subject of horticulture, botany, and

---

architectural output is not simply a function of the "facility of his pencil" but reflected his deep study and understanding of many architectural and non-architectural fields.

the latest exotic plant species collected from across the world. But in the eighteenth century, the picturesque was more than a style; it was a mode of composition and an art form. And landscape gardening was more than the establishment of flower gardens; it was a pictorially-oriented approach to transforming both architecture and the landscape. It was this earlier eighteenth-century tradition, articulated by such landscape gardeners and authors as Humphry Repton (1752-1818) and Thomas Whately (1726-1772) that inspired and guided A.J. Davis. Davis was introduced to this earlier landscape-gardening tradition in the mid-1820s by the circle of Hudson Valley School artists including Samuel F. B. Morse (1791-1872) and Thomas Cole (1801-1848). He deepened his understanding of this tradition through continued reading of these sources throughout the 1830s, in time developing his own personal interpretation and expression of it. All of this was years before he met Downing, which occurred sometime in early 1839 through the encouragement of Davis's important patron Robert Donaldson (1800-1872).<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> A letter of introduction from Downing to Davis dated December 12, 1838 survives in Anthony Garvin Collection at the University of Pennsylvania. In the letter, Downing writes that "My friend Robert Donaldson, Esq., has informed me that he mentioned my name to you and that you were so kind to offer to show me any plans, views, or work in your possession which might be of any service to me." At the time of this letter, Downing was a virtually unknown 23-year old nursery operator and Davis was a prominent 35-year old professional architect with many completed designs in his portfolio. Downing, quoted in George B. Tatum, *Andrew Jackson Downing, Arbiter of American Taste, 1815-1852*, ph.D, diss. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 53-54. On February 15, 1839, Davis wrote in his Day Book that he was "[drawing] H. Sheldon's Villa on wood for A.J. Downing for engraving 10." This suggests that the initial meeting between Davis and Downing took place in January or early February of 1839. Davis, *Day Book*, vol. 1, 196.

## Architectural Composer

Why does this matter? Because looking at Davis's work through the lense of the earlier English landscape gardening tradition brings many things into focus about his life and work that are otherwise unintelligible. For example, A.J. Davis famously called himself an "architectural composer" on his business cards. Many theories have been advanced about the meaning of this title over the years. Some authors have interpreted this title to mean that Davis likened himself to Mozart, mixing exotic architectural styles into elaborate symphonies.<sup>11</sup> Others, such as the scholar and curator Carrie Rebora, have argued that Davis's creation of the term "architectural composer" suggests a compromise between professions. "He [Davis] was not an architect, he was not an artist; he composed views of existing buildings in embellished settings for use by engravers, a process that required a draftsman's skill and an artist's inventiveness."<sup>12</sup>

But my research has shown that Davis continued to call himself an "architectural composer" on his business cards for at least a decade after he had become a professional architect. For example, one surviving "architectural composer" business card notes "Rooms at the University and 14 Wall Street" which dates this example to between 1837 and 1842 (figure 0.2).<sup>13</sup> During these same years,

---

<sup>11</sup> See for example, John Donaghue, *Alexander Jackson Davis, Romantic Architect, 1803-1892* (New York: Arno Press, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Carrie Rebora, "Alexander Jackson Davis and the Arts of Design" in *Alexander Jackson Davis: American Architect 1803-1852* (New York: Rizzoli Intl Press 1992), 29.

<sup>13</sup> Davis is listed at the combination of addresses in the 1837-1838 city directory. He appears to have maintained this pair of addresses until 1842 when he renewed his partnership with Ithiel Town and moved to 93 Merchant's Exchange. Thomas Longworth, *Longworth's American Almanack* (New York: Thomas Longworth, 1837), 191. All of the surviving Davis business cards list the title "architectural composer" and various addresses from the first part of his

Davis was already acknowledged as one of the leading professional architects working in America. During the first half of the 1830s, Davis had designed state capitols and customhouses, townhouses, and gothic villas working with his partner and mentor Ithiel Town. In the second half of the decade, working on his own, Davis was making his name as a leading country house architect, having completed the initial transformation of Blithewood (1836) and begun Knoll (1838-42) for former Mayor of New York William Paulding. And by 1842, Davis was busy executing a string of country house commissions that resulted from the acclaim for his published designs in Downing's first two books.

Rather than reflecting an immature state or a compromise, then, Davis self-identification as an "architectural composer" reflected something fundamental about Davis's identity as an architect and his views on how architecture should be practiced.<sup>14</sup> His landscape "compositions" of buildings, trees, rocks, water and ground, were not merely renderings of finished projects but integral to the way he designed.<sup>15</sup> Studying Davis's surviving drawings and reading his diary, one is struck by how much of his design work for his Hudson Valley projects was done onsite rather than on the drafting board at the office.<sup>16</sup> Davis

---

career. It is not known whether he continued to use this title on his business card in his later career.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, in newspaper advertisements from the late 1830s and 1840s, Davis called himself an architect suggesting that he differentiated the way the way he represented himself to the general public (to whom architect was more understandable) and the recipients of his business card (who might better appreciate the meaning and associations of the title architectural composer).

<sup>15</sup> Another surviving business card includes the title "Architectural Composer and Landscape Painter." Avery Library (1955.001.00402).

<sup>16</sup> For his established clients, Davis customarily created pencil sketches onsite of elevations, plans and perspectival views (incorporating landscape features). He then worked up details of complex features like oriel windows and verandahs and balustrades back in the office.

composed his designs on the spot, making pencil and water color studies of the architectural design in context, walking around with his clients to examine the character of the site from all sides, considering the approaches, the view from within and the view from without, and evaluating the way the architectural “objects” could be integrated into a unified landscape composition.<sup>17</sup> In this respect Davis operated as a “plein-air architect,” working, like generations of landscape painters before him, to truly capture the actual conditions of light and shadow, atmosphere and space, topography and plantings that defined the overall scene. This is what Davis meant by his title of “architectural composer:” the ability to visualize and create artistically cohesive architectural scenes or compositions in real landscapes by blending the compositional techniques of landscape painting and architectural design. As we will discuss in subsequent chapters, this conceptualization follows directly from eighteenth-century English landscape gardening precedents.

### **Study Organization**

This paper is structured into seven sections. The first chapter provides an account of Davis’s early career and education, his participation in the artistic circles of the Hudson River School, and the early years of the National Academy of Design. Chapter Two provides a review of the historical development of the English landscape gardening tradition and the changing meaning of the

---

<sup>17</sup> Davis’s working methods, in this respect, followed the lead of one his favorite English landscape gardener authors Humphry Repton who advised: “Others take a plan, and fancy it may be adopted to any situation; but, in reality, the plan must be made not only to fit the spot, it ought actually be made on the spot, that every door and window may be adapted to the aspects and prospects of the situation.” And like Repton, Davis over time became equally concerned with both external appearances and internal comfort in his country house projects. Humphry Repton, *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the late Humphry Repton, esq. being his entire works on these subjects*, J.C. Loudon ed., (London: Longman & Co., 1840), 500.



Picturesque over time. It reviews the vast landscape gardening literature available to Davis in the 1830s including the so-called “villa books” of the Regency period, and it provides an account of the ideas of three writers/landscape gardeners who were especially important to Davis throughout his career: Thomas Whately, Humphry Repton, and John Claudius Loudon. Chapters Three through Six are structured as case studies, examining in detail the evolution of four A.J. Davis Hudson Valley “picturesque transformation” projects through the lense of landscape gardening. Chapter Seven brings the discussion into the present, evaluating the distinct contemporary preservation issues that emerge from the case studies and offering a range of recommended strategies for dealing with them at each property.

Figure 0.1

nos. 437 and 439 West Forty-ninth Street,  
It—11 between Ninth and Tenth avenues.

Specifications and Working Details for  
**BUILDING,**  
and **LANDSCAPE GARDENING.**



Securing safety, and large results with small means. Lands and sites selected from the smallest cottage of \$500, to the large mansion. See executed works, city and country, of

**ALEX. J. DAVIS,**  
Architect, 36 Waverley Place.


All Architects protest against the style of the new buildings in New York, as depraved in the extreme, puerile, wasteful, and exhibiting almost every abuse contemned by judicious critics; witness the new Post-office, Tribune building, stores and churches. Does not one of these cap the climax of damnable deformity? and as the Sun has it, "Offspring of low ambition, diseased pride, sudden wealth, gorgeous shoddy, and vulgar pretention." My dear Public, will you not read and reflect upon this headlong tendency which architecture exhibits at present for the ostentatious, losing all sight, in audience halls, of fitness; in stores and dwellings, security; in churches, simplicity, dignity, and true beauty? (1)

**LANDSCAPE GARDENING**

A. J. DAVIS COLLECTION

A.J. Davis. Newspaper advertisement. Circa 1860s-70s. Avery.

Working Details fo.  
**BUILDING**  
AND  
**Landscape Gardening;**  
SECURING SAFETY AND LARGE RESULTS  
WITH SMALL MEANS.



See Executed Works, City and Country.

**ALEX. J. DAVIS, Arc.,**  
No. 1 University Building, Waverley Pl.

Real estate owners and all appreciating the important science of architecture, are invited to inspect drawings, models and books tending to correct the depraved, costly and incendiary practices of the day, lacking proportion, stability and economy.

It has ever been less the Architect's study to OBTAIN the patronage of the public by catering to a depraved taste for vain show and unmeaning ornament, than to DESERVE it by a careful attention to the true interests of proprietors, in the economical arrangement of materials, and in the expression of moral beauty, fitness and purpose.

11

A.J. Davis. Newspaper advertisement. Labeled in pencil in hand of Joseph Beales Davis "NY Ev. Post Sat Aug 5, 76." Avery.

Figure 0.2



A.J. Davis. Business Card, circa 1837-1842. Avery.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Affinity of the Arts and the Education of A.J. Davis**

## The Affinity of the Arts

Christopher Hussey, in his landmark *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (1927) described a historical moment in late eighteenth century England when “the relation of all the arts to one another, through the pictorial appreciation of nature, was so close that poetry, painting, gardening, architecture, and the art of travel may have been said to have been fused into the single art of the landscape.”<sup>1</sup> During the mid-to-late 1820s, this broadly conceived conception of landscape and the powerful notion of the “affinity of the arts” crossed the Atlantic and arrived in New York with such painters, and writers as Samuel F.B. Morse, James Fenimore Cooper, Thomas Cole, and Washington Irving. It continued to build in intensity as waves of artists and writers returned to New York after stints studying abroad in England and Italy through the 1830s. In the New World, the transplanted ideas of the English Picturesque became the genesis of what we refer to today as the Hudson River School.

Despite the rapid growth of New York during the 1820s that really took off with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, the city and the arts community were still tiny and the market for original American art other than portraiture was miniscule. Painters, writers, and their patrons all lived in close proximity to each other on the tip of Manhattan. This proximity and a shared sense of mission to raise the standing of the arts in America produced a tight-knit group that socialized together, learned from one another, and produced artistic works that related to one another through the medium of landscape. Painters such as Samuel F. B. Morse, William Dunlap and John Wesley Jarvis were equally represented in literary associations such as the Bread and Cheese Club (1824-27) and Sketch Club (1829-47). And literary productions such James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-41) owed much to the mode of visual

---

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London: Putnam, 1927), 4.

composition practiced by landscape painters.<sup>2</sup> Cooper “painted” expansive landscapes of the American frontier with impressive pictorial detail that were more than “scenery,” they were the story. And landscape painters, such as Thomas Cole, returned the favor by rendering scenes from these tales in graphic form in such works as his *Last of the Mohicans* (1827). It was also an era when American painters and writers, following English examples, went beyond the two-dimensional representation of landscapes to the creation of three-dimensional physical ones. The English landscape painter George Harvey (1806-1873) helped the American writer Washington Irving (1783-1859) remodel a Dutch farmhouse into the famous picturesque cottage and landscape garden of Sunnyside (1835-50). Morse designed castellated towers for James Fenimore Cooper’s Gothic transformation of Ostego Hall (1832).<sup>3</sup> This was not mere artistic dabbling but reflected something fundamental in the way the arts were understood, an understanding that had its root in the English experience of the Picturesque.

Around the same time the artists of the future Hudson River School began to take up residence in New York, A.J. Davis returned to the city in 1823 at the age of twenty. These artists became Davis’s teachers and friends, and the related circles of wealthy patrons of these artists became his future clients.<sup>4</sup> During the

---

<sup>2</sup> Historical background in this section relies a seminal article by James F. Beard, Jr., “Cooper and his Artistic Contemporaries” in *New York History*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (October, 1954), pp. 480-495.

<sup>3</sup> Morse’s involvement as architectural re-designer is described in Kerry Dean Carso “The Old Dwelling Transmogrified: James Fenimore Cooper’s Otego Hall” in *James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art, Papers from the 2001 Cooper Seminar (No. 13)*, The State University of New York College at Oneonta. (Oneonta, NY: 2001), 24.

<sup>4</sup> For example, James Hillhouse of New Haven, a member of Cooper’s Bread and Cheese Club, was an early collector of Thomas Cole’s paintings and also

1820s, Davis was more of an observer than a leading participant in these circles. He was a little younger and less experienced, a student rather than a leader in this period. But his artistic talent and hunger to learn were registered by all. And these artists were generous with him, lending him books, helping to introduce him to important contacts, and exhibiting his works at their annual shows. During the 1830s, after he had established himself professionally, Davis deepened his friendships with these artists, going on sketching trips with Thomas Cole and Asher Durand, visiting Washington Irving at Sunnyside, exploring the countryside with George Harvey. Even if his initial presence was peripheral, Davis early encounters with this group made an indelible impression on his future career as a country house architect. For understanding Davis and his future residential work in the Hudson Valley, perhaps the critical figure within the Hudson Valley School is Samuel F. B. Morse.

### **The New York Drawing Association and the National Academy of Design**

In the fall of 1825, the recently widowed Morse began holding informal evening sessions in his townhouse on Canal Street to sketch sculpture casts borrowed from the American Academy of Fine Art (1802-41), at that time the only arts institution in the City. The American Academy, originally founded by Chancellor Robert R. Livingston and his brother Edward P. Livingston, was a conservative institution organized primarily around the needs of patrons and collectors. It held annual exhibitions of American and European artists work in a gallery housed in the former Alms House in City Hall Park. But the academy offered no regular program of artists' education and offered only limited access for the rising generation of artists operating in New York.<sup>5</sup> A.J. Davis was one of

---

awarded A.J. Davis his first professional architectural commission for a Greek Revival country villa in New Haven (later called Sachem's Wood) in 1828.

<sup>5</sup> During the 1820s, students were only allowed access to sketch in the gallery between the hours of 6:00-8:00 am and often the doors were locked when they

the early members of Morse's artistic evenings, a group that soon began calling itself the New York Drawing Association.<sup>6</sup> Despite early support from the American Academy, the members of the Drawing Association chafed under the authority of the American Academy, increasingly viewing themselves as an independent body. In January of 1826, the group was formally reorganized as the National Academy of Design with Morse elected President.<sup>7</sup> A.J. Davis's future architectural partner Ithiel Town was a founding member of the National Academy of Design and Davis entered the official roster as a student in the Antique School.<sup>8</sup>

Three months after the founding of the new organization, President Morse delivered his landmark *Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts* at Columbia College over a series of four evenings.<sup>9</sup> This was the first lecture series on the fine arts delivered in America with an ambitious program.<sup>10</sup> As a student in Morse's newly founded National Academy of Design, it is almost

---

arrived. These and other remembrances of the period are documented in William Dunlap, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in America* (New York: George P. Scott and Co., 1834).

<sup>6</sup> Davis was welcomed as a member of the Drawing Association on November 16, 1825. Amelia Peck, ed., *Alexander Jackson Davis: American Architect: 1803-1892* (New York: Rizzoli Intl, 1992), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Morse who be re-elected President of the National Academy of Design until he stepped down in 1845, nearly a decade after he had stopped painting.

<sup>8</sup> Op cit.

<sup>9</sup> The National Academy of Design had no permanent headquarters until 1863, moving through a series of rented spaces in the pre-Civil War period.

<sup>10</sup> On May 11, 1824, the author and lawyer Gulian Verplanck had delivered a single evening address on the fine arts but this lecture was not nearly as ambitious and lack the many linkages to the English Picturesque contained in Morse's text.



certain that A.J. Davis was in the audience. Morse's lectures, which he repeated again in 1829 and 1835, gave a succinct expression to the ideas and ideals of the English Picturesque. It was here that Davis probably learned about English landscape gardening for the first time.

Following English precedents, Morse defined the "natural affinity" of the fine arts "whose principal intention is to please the imagination" and included landscape gardening as one of the "perfect fine arts" along with poetry and music. He defined the landscape gardener as one who "to a certain extent, possess the mind of the Landscape Painter but he paints with the objects [of nature] themselves."<sup>11</sup> And Morse, following the English landscape gardener Thomas Whately who he quoted extensively in the lectures, defined "nature" "to include buildings."<sup>12</sup> According to Morse "every kind of building as it regards external appearance belongs also to this artform [landscape gardening] from the simple outline of a rustic arbor to the splendid form of a palace."<sup>13</sup> As we will discuss further in the next chapter, this was an expansive definitions of "landscape" that been forged in England in the prior century.

### **Morse's Definition of Architect and Landscape Gardener**

Another important part of Morse's lecture for Davis was his separation of the intellectual from the practical operation of the arts. He describes as an architect as one who "combines the character of a painter in the faculty of inventing and

---

<sup>11</sup> Samuel F. B. Morse, *Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts*, Nicolai Civosky, ed. (University of Missouri Press, 1983) 51.

<sup>12</sup>Morse's endorsement of Thomas Whately, who he called "an accomplished writer as well as gardener" strongly influenced A.J. Davis who was still referring to this work as "the classic on modern gardening" during the Civil War. Morse, 81. Davis letter to George Merritt dated October 5, 1864, quoted in Peck, 60.

<sup>13</sup> Morse, 81.

designing with that of an engineer or builder.”<sup>14</sup> Only through design could architecture be considered a fine art. “If a man designs a building he is miscalled an Architect, if he draws it by rule and compass though designed by another, or calculates the quantity, strength, durability, and position of the materials he is miscalled an Architect, and even if he simply carries the design into execution he is miscalled an Architect.”<sup>15</sup> A similar division runs through Morse’s definition of landscape gardening. “Here there is the same distinction between the mechanical and intellectual operation as Architecture; it is not the laborer who levels the hill, or fills a hollow, or plants a grove that is the landscape gardener, it is he alone with the ‘prophetic eye of taste,’ sees prospectively the full grown forest in the young plantation, and selects with a poet’s feeling passages which he knows will affect agreeably the imagination.”<sup>16</sup> The division of labor implicit in these definitions anticipates the way Davis defined his professional identity in the years to come.<sup>17</sup>

At the time of these lectures, neither architecture nor landscape architecture was a profession in America as we understand it today. Davis was among the founders of the American Institute of Architects in 1857, but the education and standards of professional practice that define the field are largely a post-Civil war development. During the 1820s and 1830s, most architects were simply

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid,49-50.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid,51.

<sup>17</sup> The timing of this lecture and its potential influence on Davis’s thinking about his professional identity are very suggestive. Davis received his first paid commissions to provide architectural views from the bookseller A.T. Goodrich and the architect Josiah R. Brady in the same year as the lectures (1826). He was first listed in the city directory as an “architectural composer” with an office on Wall Street in the following year. Peck, 29.

builders who worked from pattern books. A.J. Davis carved out a personal definition of being an architect, or “architectural composer,” as he called himself in the early years, that strongly relates to Morse’s conception in the lectures. He was not a builder, and even though he later learned about the practical aspects of construction and engineering from architects Josiah Brady and Ithiel Town, he was rarely heavily involved in the construction or project management side of his commissions. Instead, Davis functioned more as an overall project visualizer and design consultant, providing a picture of the whole and a small set of working drawings, but leaving it to his clients to hire a builder and manage much of the project. Similarly, Davis’s involvement with landscape gardening was at the level of creating overall landscape pictures and scenes rather than providing detailed horticultural or earth-moving expertise. By accepting and internalizing Morse’s categories, Davis was able to continue to operate as an artist in his chosen field.

### **Transforming Powers on the Art**

In his third lecture, Morse provided an interesting example “before-and-after” example of a landscape gardening redesign of a typical American country property of the Federal period. This followed a convention established by the English landscape gardener Humphry Repton who used watercolor views with sliding tabs in his famous red books to show the effect of the proposed “picturesque improvements” on his client’s estates. Morse’s example, which was accompanied by a pair of sketches, was an example of what he called the “transforming power” of landscape gardening.<sup>18</sup> He begins with a plain three-story Federal house, framed by a couple of Lombardy poplars, and bordered by stone and picket fence, with a pair of detached woodsheds to the side; a typical

---

<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, the “before” and “after” sketches used by Morse in these lectures have not survived.

country residence for a well-to-do New England farmer of the period. He describes this house “with its three monotonous rows of windows; its bare roofs without eaves or balustrade; its four equidistant chimneys and its abortive pediment, altogether appearing as if the Genius of Desolation had been the architect, and has planned it for his own residence.”<sup>19</sup> Morse then goes on to describe the improvements made by his imaginary landscape gardener:

He has taken away the fence and substituted a green hedge, he has cut down the poplars; and instead of a straight path has turned the approach into a semicircular form enclosing the areas making one beautiful lawn; the unsightly woodsheds are masked by an ornamental connected front of blind arches. He has not built here a new building, neither has he built a new house... Even the form of the pediment is preserved. He has concealed the bare roof with a balustrade; broken the insipidity of the front by bringing forward the pediment to be supported by four columns whose bases rest on a broad flight of steps, thus giving by its shadow a variety in its appearance which is obvious. From each end a platform for flowerpots and flowers connecting by gradation the house with the shrubbery introduced on the brow of the hill. Beyond the house is seen the same level meadow and the same river as before but the meadow is enclosed as a lawn by the trees and shrubs; and the river concealed in some parts only, is suffered to sparkle here and there through the underwood; and by leaving the imagination to supply its course Mystery is created...<sup>20</sup>

What is striking in example is the simultaneous transformation of both landscape and architectural features and the way major changes in the overall character of the place are accomplished with relatively slight means.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to

---

<sup>19</sup> Morse, 82-83.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>21</sup> What is also striking in Morse’s example is the relative sophistication of the landscape changes (which reflect the strategies of late eighteenth century English landscape gardening) relative to the architectural ones. This is still the same Federal house, just gussied up with no real change in its comforts or conveniences. In comparison, Davis’s “picturesque transformations” of the

contemplate the effect of this presentation on the young A.J. Davis. Certainly, the old-fashioned Federal farm houses he transformed in later years for his Hudson Valley clients were not that different from the “before” house in this example.

### **Changing Landscapes**

One thing that Morse’s example points to was a change in tastes that was already beginning to occur in the Hudson Valley properties where A.J. Davis would be hired to work during the 1830s and 1840s. During the colonial era, Hudson Valley life was dominated by the patterns of landholding produced by the manor system. Land patents awarded by the English crown to Anglo-Dutch families during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century had created enormous wealth and power for such family dynasties such as the Livingstons, Van Rennsalears, and Van Cortlandts. These families dominated the political and business life of the region, and had the means to travel to Europe bringing home the latest ideas. After the Revolution, a large number of members of the Livingston family established country seats in the area immediately south of the main manor at Clermont in southern Columbia County, New York. But these large gentleman’s estates but were still operated as working farms and contained only rudimentary ornamental landscape features. Farming and manufacturing operations such as saw mills were located close to the house and gardens with an eye to convenience and practicality.

All of this began to change in the 1830s. What had been a point of patriotic pride for the individuals who created these estates (having a well-ordered productive farm) was suddenly unacceptable for their children who had come back from Europe filled with ideas and examples of English-style landscape gardening.

---

1830s and 1840s are far more sophisticated architecturally and show much more attention to both use and appearance, aspects and prospects.

This situation was amplified by new wealthy arrivals to the area that established secondary country residences along the river; a circumstance made possible by the availability of regular steam boat service up to Albany. Over the course of the nineteenth century a common cycle was repeated in this stretch of the Hudson River. Properties became more formally landscaped and embellished, and farming and other activities were “aestheticized,” moved out of view, or discontinued altogether. Working landscapes became pleasure grounds. These larger land usage patterns provided the context for Davis’s “picturesque transformation projects” which we will discuss in subsequent chapters.

## **Chapter 2**

**A.J. Davis and**

**The English Landscape Gardening Tradition**

## First Readings

Davis famously dated the start of his professional architectural career to a reading of Stuart & Revett's *The Antiquities of Athens* (1762); the landmark English publication that provide exact measured drawing of Greek temples, columns and statuary. In his diary or "Daybook," he wrote "1828 March 15 First study of Stuarts Athens from which I date Professional Practice."<sup>1</sup> From his earliest years, Davis was a major bibliophile, and his intensive study of books was a substitute for the classical education he never had and the European trips he never went on. Davis had borrowed the Stuart & Revett volume from Ithiel Town (1784-1844), then the leading architect in New York with the largest architectural library in America. Town and his partner Martin E. Thompson (1786-1867) had an office in the Merchant's Exchange on Wall Street, the most prominent commercial building in New York, and generously opened their library up to the public.<sup>2</sup> This served as powerful advertisement for the firm's up-to-date and archaeologically correct taste.<sup>3</sup>

In 1829, Thompson left the firm and Davis replaced him. On February 1, 1829 Davis wrote "Joined with Ithiel Town and removed to 34 Exchange."<sup>4</sup> Between 1829 and 1835, the resulting partnership, Town & Davis, became the leading

---

<sup>1</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 13.

<sup>2</sup> The ground floors of this building, designed by Martin E. Thompson in 1826 in the neo-classical style, served as the first permanent home of the stock exchange with smaller professional offices on other floors.

<sup>3</sup> A period guidebook to New York described Town and Thompson's architectural room at the Merchant's Exchange as "the most valuable and extensive collection of books and prints, relative to that noble art and science." *The Picture of New-York, and Stranger's Guide to the Commercial Metropolis of the United States*, (New York: A.T. Goodrich, 1828), 376.

<sup>4</sup> Davis Day Book, Vol. 1, 91.



exponents of the Greek Revival in America. Shortly after making Davis a partner in his practice, Town left for an extended trip to London, Paris, and Italy, leaving on October 20, 1829 and returning on July of 1830. This trip proved to be an extensive shopping opportunity for Town who arrived in London on November 19 and reported that he was “very busy buying books” which were then “so cheap in London.”<sup>5</sup> On March 26, 1831, Davis recorded that “Mr. Town got 17 cases of books from Europe.” indicating that his purchases were still arriving.<sup>6</sup> Town was away for long intervals during his partnership with Davis, and the firm’s young partner had ample opportunity to peruse the library at his leisure. Town’s library, swelled by the new purchases from the European trip, eventually reached 11,000 volumes by the time of his death in 1844. But Town was a generation older than Davis and most of the artists in the National Academy of Design and his taste was more conservative, weighted more to classical architecture rather than the picturesque villa styles that were popular in London during the 1830s.<sup>7</sup> Even after an extensive European tour in which he was exposed to the latest examples of contemporary English architecture and toured Italy in the company of Samuel F. B. Morse, Town exhibited no great change in his architectural tastes; his trip merely added to his library and deepened his appreciation for the classical past. Architectural historian William Pierson has argued that even though Town was “not opposed to the picturesque” and was

---

<sup>5</sup> R.W. Liscombe, “A New Era in My Life:’ Ithiel Town Abroad.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Mar., 1991), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 110.

<sup>7</sup> Even if the Picturesque wasn’t a major influence on Ithiel Town, he still purchased books on the subject for his library and made them available to Davis. A preliminary review of the inventory of Town’s books included in the auction listing after his death shows an assortment of Picturesque and landscape gardening titles including multiple works by Knight and Loudon, a book on the landscape gardens at Stow, and George Mason’s *Designs in Gardening* (1795). Town appears to have owned few of the picturesque villa books; Davis appears to have purchased these on his own.

familiar with picturesque doctrine from his wide readings, it was “not his natural idiom.”<sup>8</sup> And landscape doesn’t seem to have registered at all in his work.

But Davis, who strongly identified with the imported ideas of the Picturesque that were beginning to circulate in the artistic circles of New York, had a very different response. Even as the firm continued to develop a reputation for architecturally correct Grecian designs for public buildings and residences, the firm’s younger partner was increasingly drawn to romantic English picturesque villas and landscape design. Davis’s Day Book provides some intriguing clues about his changing reading taste. Two months after Towns’ return from Europe, he recorded “1830 Sept 17 Study of Repton, Whately, Marshall on Landscape Gardening” naming three of the most famous English writers on the subject.<sup>9</sup> The next fall he was reading a major picturesque theorist; “1830 Oct 7 Alison on Taste.”<sup>10</sup> After a year lapse in which Town & Davis had attempted to obtain federal commissions in Washington D.C., Davis recorded “1832 March 9 Study of Gothic or English Architecture, Britton, Rickman” alluding to two of the major historical surveys of Gothic architecture.<sup>11</sup> On May 2, 1833, he was again “reading Repton on landscape gardening and Nicholson’s dictionary.”<sup>12</sup> These isolated diary entries are the tip of the iceberg. Davis is also known to have owned and (quoted from) such major works on picturesque aesthetics such as Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757); Lord Kames’s *Elements of Criticism* (1762); Uvedale Price’s

---

<sup>8</sup> William H. Pierson, *American Buildings and their Architects, Technology & The Picturesque, The Corporate and the Early Gothic Styles* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1978), 184-185.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 99.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 153.

*Essay on the Picturesque* (1794); and Richard Payne Knight's *The Landscape* (1795). After his split with Town in 1835, Davis continued to steadily add to his library of English landscape gardening and architectural picturesque pattern books.

### **English Landscape Gardening literature**

By the time A.J. Davis began his architectural career in the late 1820s, the active development of English landscape gardening and the Picturesque was largely over. But it had generated a voluminous literature of architectural, gardening, philosophical and poetical publications, all of which were built upon a shared tradition. Even though these books all ostensibly deal with the same subject (the house and its grounds), they do so with varying degrees of *emphasis* (some publications deal exclusively with landscape or horticulture, some are primarily house pattern books with scenery), *form of expression* (some are poems, some are philosophical tracts, some are practical treatises) and *garden style* (some are formal and classical, others are informal and irregular). To begin to understand what Davis learned from this diverse literature, and how he applied it in his Hudson Valley projects, it is necessary to take a step back, and understand how the English landscape gardening tradition first developed.

### **Landscape Gardening and the Classical Tradition**

English landscape gardening was a multi-faceted artistic and cultural phenomenon that blossomed during the eighteenth century. "Ornamental gardening," "landscape gardening," "improvement," or "picturesque improvement," as the subject was variously called during the period, went through multiple stages of conceptual and practical development over the course of the century. Beginning from a small core of intellectuals attempting to revive the ancient traditions of the Roman villa in England, landscape gardening morphed into a broad cultural preoccupation across many segments of English society. By the end of the century, landscape gardening had been subsumed

under the title of the Picturesque, reflecting the terminology and style of its final form. But the literature of the Picturesque, and the famous late eighteenth century “war of words” between Uvedale Price (1747-1829), Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824), and Humphry Repton (1752-1818) was only one small part of a larger whole that involved different interpretations about the proper relationship of Art and Nature, and Landscape and Architecture.<sup>13</sup>

Landscape gardening, as it developed in Georgian England, was the practice of gardening pursued as an art form on the scale of an entire property. Underlying this practice was an association with the art of painting and a pictorially oriented approach to visualizing and composing landscapes. This connection between paintings and landscapes, which gave rise to the term “picturesque,” goes back to at least Pliny the Younger (A.D. 61-112) who described the view from his Tuscan villa as “a picture beautifully composed rather than a work of Nature accidentally delivered.”<sup>14</sup> It was the ideals and literature of this late classical period that includes the writings of Horace (B.C. 65-8), Virgil (B.C. 70-19), and Pliny, and the tradition of Roman villa life they described in their writings that provided the initial impulse for what later became a broad movement in England. Because no villas and gardens survived intact from the Classical period and the buried cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum were as yet unknown, founders of the landscape gardening tradition, including Alexander Pope (1688-

---

<sup>13</sup> The so-called “Picturesque Controversy” of the 1790s involved a public debate between two different interpretations of the picturesque landscape garden. Price and Knight condemned the work of Lancelot “Capability Brown” (1716-1783) and his followers as Nature stripped “bare and bald” and advocated for a less manicured landscape, which they called “picturesque.” Repton defended his predecessor Brown in print, penning public letters, and including chapters in his books that attempted to refute the ideas of Price and Knight. This public argument stretched on for an entire decade. Additional discussion of this debate is provided later in this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Pliny, quoted in William Marshall, *Planting and Ornamental Gardening; a Practical Treatise* (London: J. Dodsley, 1785), 204.

1744), Joseph Addison (1672-1719), Lord Burlington (1694-1753), and William Kent (1685-1748) looked initially to the villas and gardens of the Italian Renaissance for appropriate models.<sup>15</sup> This gave rise to the Palladian movement in architecture and the first of the new landscape gardens in England. But because these borrowed garden forms were the product themselves of an earlier revival of Roman life in the 1500s, they were later rejected as not fully reflecting the “simplicity” and “naturalness” of true ancient gardens. It was the continuing search for the proper relationship of the garden to “Nature,” held up against the standards of the ancient Roman writers, and the writings of Pope, Addison, and other British classicists, that fueled the development of what became English landscape gardening.

A critical literary document in the English tradition was Alexander Pope’s *An Epistle to the Right Honourable Richard Earl of Burlington, Occasioned by his Publishing Palladio’s Designs of the Bathes, Arches, and Theatre’s of Ancient Rome* (1731). This didactic poem, with its famous admonitions to consult the “genius of the place in all,” contained many other important verses that were critically “unpacked” over time, opening up the door to what historian Diana Balmori has called “an aesthetic based not on formal rules, but chance, intuition, informal ordering, and local accommodation.”<sup>16</sup> This poem also initiated a long tradition of poems relating to landscape gardening including William Mason’s *The English Garden* (1772) and Richard Payne Knight’s *The Landscape: A Didactic Poem* (1794). It became mandatory for all subsequent landscape gardening authors to display

---

<sup>15</sup> The excavations at Herculaneum were initiated in 1738 and at Pompeii in 1748 by Spanish engineer Rocque Joaquin de Alcubierre. But the results of these discoveries were not widely known until later in the century through architectural publications.

<sup>16</sup>Diana Balmori, “Architecture, Landscape, and the Intermediate Structure: Eighteenth-Century Experiments in Mediation” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Mar., 1991), 43.

similar examples of classical erudition in their writings as proof of their correct taste.

### **Three Stages of the Picturesque**

“The Picturesque” is a notoriously difficult subject to define. A major source of the confusion is that the meaning of the term “picturesque” substantially changed over the course of the eighteenth century. All of the definitions of the Picturesque make connections between landscapes (both shaped by man and “unadorned nature”) and the art of painting. But the *type* of paintings that were imitated, and the way and degree to which landscape and buildings were manipulated, changed considerably over the century. Three distinct historical definitions of the Picturesque can be identified that correspond to three different prevailing schools of landscape gardening in Georgian England.<sup>17</sup>

#### ***The Picturesque: first stage (1710s -1740s)***

As early as the 1710s, the term “picturesque” was used by Alexander Pope to refer to scenery that functioned as a “set” or “theater for human actions,” in the manner of *history paintings* such as the landscapes of Nicholas Poussin (figure 2.1).<sup>18</sup> And the “play” was typically inspired by a Classical text or a historical incident. This idea of the Classical “theater in the garden” was derived from Grand Tour experiences by the founding group of “Augustan intellectuals,” including Pope, Joseph Addison, William Kent, and Lord Burlington, who were inspired by Italian Renaissance gardens such as the Villa Aldobrandini, the Villa

---

<sup>17</sup> This section relies upon John Dixon Hunt’s *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), especially Chapter 2, that describes the early development of the Picturesque.

<sup>18</sup> Hunt specifically quotes Pope’s use of “Picturesque” to describe Patroclus’s address to Achilles in front of the burning ships in Book XVI of the Iliad. Hunt, 107-108.

de Este, and Villa Matei. Back in England, these individuals organized landscapes into a series of separate scenes, each framed by architectural elements (obelisks, Roman temples, Gothic castles, mills, bridges) that set the appropriate stage for human drama and emotional response (figure 2.2). As John Dixon Hunt writes, “not only were gardens organized in perspectival views like stage sets, but like those in the theater their scenes were unthinkable except as stages for human action.”<sup>19</sup> To guide the action, the classical props were often inscribed with lines of verse that gave clues to the literary and historic sources being alluded to. Important examples of this early conceptualization of the Picturesque include Pope’s villa and gardens at Twickenham (1715-20), Lord Burlington’s villa at Chiswick (1726-1729) and, on the most grand scale, Lord Cobham’s Stowe (1715-1750).

### *The Picturesque: second stage (1740s-1780s)*

Beginning in the later 1740s, a new definition of the Picturesque and associated style of landscape gardening started to take root in England. The gardens of the aristocracy began to shed their densely packaged classical allusions in favor of a looser, less formal style. Thomas Whately (1726-1772), writing in 1770, described this change as the transition between the “emblematic” garden and the “expressive” garden. Describing the obelisks, temples, and ruins of the first period, he wrote “all these devices are emblematical rather than expressive, they may be ingenuous contrivances, and recall absent ideas to the recollection but they make no immediate impression; for they must be examined, compared, perhaps explained before the whole design of them is well understood.”<sup>20</sup> In contrast to this, Whately praised gardens that were “expressive;” that prompted

---

<sup>19</sup> Hunt, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Whately, *Observations on Modern Gardening, Illustrated by Descriptions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: T. Payne, 1775), 151.

artistic feelings through the enhancement and reshaping of natural materials and forms. In this second stage, the term “picturesque” also was loosened up and came to refer to any scenery (especially pastoral and highly groomed landscapes) that looked like a *landscape painting*, by such painters as Claude Lorrain (figure 2.3). While Classical architectural forms were still part of this paradigm, they were used in a different way. Their purpose became less didactic and more generalized. Classical temples were used to contribute to the character of a larger pastoral landscape rather than tell a specific story from the Classical Age.

Landscape gardening in this second stage of the picturesque was undertaken on a far grander scale. The house and outbuilding, and the contours of the landscape itself, were transformed to conform to the aesthetic conventions of landscape painting (figure 2.4).<sup>21</sup> Rather than creating individual garden rooms, expansive landscape prospects over the entire property were created by the removal of fences and other boundaries, and the introduction of the invisible fence, or ha-ha-wall. Landscape gardener and aesthete Horace Walpole (1717-1797) called the ha-ha wall “the capital stroke, the leading step to all that has followed.”<sup>22</sup> Sweeping lawns were created that came directly up to the main house, lakes were created by damming streams, trees were carefully grouped into artful “clumps” and “belts,” serpentine approach roads were installed, all designed to “improve” Nature. Even though these landscape designs were highly stylized, they were produced largely with natural materials and the goal was to produce a heightened sense of nature that reflected the “genius of the place” celebrated by Addison and Pope.

---

<sup>21</sup> During this period, the English aristocracy began actively collecting seventeenth century landscape paintings by Claude and Poussin. For some wealthy owners, it became a point of pride to shape at least part of their properties to imitate the specific paintings in their picture galleries.

<sup>22</sup>Horace Walpole, *Essay on Modern Gardening*, Reprint of 1782 original (Canton, PA: The Kirgate Press, 1904), 53.



William Kent is commonly credited as the originator of this new mode of landscape design, and some of his first essays in the new style were at the same properties where he designed earlier “emblematical” gardens such as Chiswick and Stowe. But it was under Kent’s successor, Lancelot “Capability” Brown, that the taste for landscape and architectural “improvement” in Georgian England spread rapidly among the landed aristocracy, leading to further stylistic development in pursuit of more “naturalistic” results. Some of the most important landscape gardens from this period include: Croome Park (1751-1783), Stourhead (1741-1780), and Pains Hill Park (1738-73).

As more and more old estates were “improved,” it became fashionable to make a tour of these country seats as well as the surrounding “picturesque” natural scenery. Over time, and under lesser talents, the often-destructive work of the “improvers” was criticized for creating “bare and bald landscapes” which destroyed the avenues of ancient trees, peasant cottages, walled kitchen gardens, and Gothic manor houses of prior generations. While a “cultivated” sense of nature was celebrated, the often-messy accretions of man’s history were not. This led to the inevitable backlash, and a subsequent redefinition of the picturesque.

### *The Picturesque: third stage (1780s-1820)*

By the early 1780s, a new paradigm of the Picturesque had emerged. Landscape painting was still the touchstone, but in this era the preferred painters were the canvases of Salvator Rosa (1615-1683) and Jacob Ruisdael (1628-1682), and the subject was “unadorned nature,” or the work of man undone by the force of nature (ruins) or in a primitive state (cottages and other rustic scenes) (figure 2.5). Gothic style architecture, whether newly created or in ruin, was especially

favored in embodying the character of this new style.<sup>23</sup> Key figures associated with the development of this new and final formulation of the Picturesque include Edmund Burke (1729-1792), William Gilpin (1724-1804), Uvedale Price (1747-1829), and Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824).

The new Picturesque was defined almost entirely in opposition to the old picturesque mode of Brown and his followers. In place of the manicured “smoothness” of Brown which Edmund Burke (and all subsequent writers from Price to Downing) described as the “beautiful,” Gilpin, Price, and Knight defined “picturesque” in terms of “roughness,” “irregularity,” “variety,” and “intricacy.”<sup>24</sup> According to Price, “the two opposite qualities of roughness and of sudden variation, joined to that of irregularity, are the most efficient causes of the picturesque.”<sup>25</sup> Knight, provided a compelling visual representation of this opposition at the end of his poem *The Landscape*, contrasting a “dressed” or “shaved” landscape in the Brownian “beautiful” mode (figure 2.6) with a somewhat overgrown “picturesque” Gothic estate (figure 2.7). These contrasting images of the “beautiful” and the “picturesque” were widely influential and would be recycled first by John Claudius Loudon and then by Andrew Jackson Downing in their influential publications (figures 2.8, 2.9).

---

<sup>23</sup> While artificial ruins of temples were part of the earlier picturesque tradition, they tended to be very stylized. During the third stage of the Picturesque, the emphasis on the process of decay became more direct and naturalistic.

<sup>24</sup> William Gilpin greatly popularized the idea of touring in search of picturesque scenery and the practice of watercolor landscape sketching. Gilpin’s publications introduced formal techniques for analyzing landscape drawn from painting and a dramatic watercolor style for rendering them (was well reproduced by the emerging technologies of aqua-tint engraving and lithography). Davis had access to examples of Gilpin’s works through his friend and patron Robert Donaldson and owned other examples of the so-called topographical literature.

<sup>25</sup> Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful, and on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London: J. Robson, 1796), 61.

In addition to these printed images, Knight's own house, Downton Castle (built 1772-78) offered a powerful physical model of the new picturesque aesthetic in architecture. Downton Castle, was a fully elaborated Gothic castle, complete with towers and battlements, that was newly built to command a view over a rugged river valley (figure 2.10). The castle is credited with spurring the trend for asymmetrical planning that was favored in later picturesque projects by landscape gardener Humphry Repton (1752-1818) and his architect collaborator John Nash (1752-1835). These examples prefigured the large castellated gothic villas of Davis's work of the 1850s such as Ericstan (1856-58) (figure 2.11).

The 1790s were also the time of the famous "picturesque controversy" which pitted Price and Knight against Humphry Repton, the leading professional landscape gardener of his generation who defended the honor of his predecessor, Capability Brown. To modern scholars, the similarities between these three writers, Price, Knight and Repton, are far more striking than their differences.<sup>26</sup> Although Repton was schooled in earlier Brownian methods of landscape composition, he was himself a product of the last stage of the Picturesque and his work and writings show a strong dedication to picturesque ideas and sensibilities tempered with the need to accommodate human convenience and comforts.

---

<sup>26</sup> For example, William Ackerman notes: "The often vituperative battles waged between Price, Knight, and Repton obscured that their goals were essentially similar." Price and Knight "were gentleman-scholars (who also argued with each other) who looked down on Repton as being below them in class and taste while he accused them of being arm-chair theoreticians who lacked the sobering experience of actually designing and executing parks, gardens, and country houses." James S. Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 220.

## End of the Picturesque era

By the 1790s, the continuing interest and development of the Picturesque reached a crescendo, and became wildly popular across many segments of British society. It became a prerequisite of the educated classes to be knowledgeable about Kent and Brown, Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa, “the middle distance,” “Claude glasses,” and “picturesque irregularity,” and to memorize quotations from Pliny, Addison and Pope on the garden arts included in the various popular gardening manuals. And this cultural fixation soon gave rise to lampoons as well, such as William Combe’s brilliant but cruel *Dr. Syntax in Search of the Picturesque* (1809) whose protagonist was modeled after William Gilpin (figure 2.12). It should be noted during this mature period, that even though the notion of “picturesque irregularity” dominated the discussion, the earlier and somewhat contradictory conceptions of the picturesque still coexisted with it in the popular mind.

Following the long interval of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), cultural tastes in England began to move on, and the radically changing shape of the countryside prompted a turn away from the picturesque county seats of the aristocracy to the suburban villas and metropolitan development of the early Victorian era. With this went an accompanying change in landscape gardening.<sup>27</sup> After the end of the Napoleonic wars (1815), gardening returned to the more formal ornamental flower gardens, planted with exotic specimen trees and bushes, appropriate to these smaller lots; a development that John Claudius Loudon (1783- 1843) called the “gardenesque.” Loudon stands at the end of the primary period of development of English landscape gardening. While he began his career as a

---

<sup>27</sup> Element of the former picturesque style were retained in these later gardens, and landscape gardening continued to be a strong cultural concern but the active development of the tradition had largely ended.

professional landscape gardener, he is best known as an encyclopedist.<sup>28</sup> He codified the often diffuse and literary written tradition of landscape gardening into a set of discrete, legible principles, and he adapted the techniques of laying out grounds, and designing houses in picturesque style to the scale and means of the middle class. Loudon included in his voluminous publications a wealth of practical knowledge on construction, domestic conveniences, hothouses, and the planting and propagation of exotic plant species. In this role of a popularizer, Loudon served as the primary role model and source for Andrew Jackson Downing, who repackaged Loudon's writings for an American audience.<sup>29</sup>

### **A.J. Davis and the Books of the Picturesque**

The preceding sections provided a brief sketch of the historical development of English landscape gardening and the picturesque. As was indicated, this tradition was as much literary and artistic as it was practical. From the start, landscape gardening was a field that was extremely self-conscious, writing and re-writing its own history and defining itself in opposition to all that had come before. Virtually all of the books created in this tradition, even more narrowly focused horticultural works, included accounts of the larger tradition; descriptions of Pliny's garden, snippets of Pope and Addison's poems,

---

<sup>28</sup> As a landscape gardener, Loudon was highly influenced by Repton, of whom he was professionally jealous. Loudon's *Treatise of the Theory and Practice of Improving Grounds* (1812) contains an extended critique of Repton's red books and many somewhat labored attempts to distinguish his own methods from Repton's. In recounting the history of landscape gardening, Loudon lumps Repton and Brown together as exponents of the beautiful, a categorization that Downing later followed.

<sup>29</sup> A.J. Davis was also an avid reader of Loudon's works which he used extensively as a source of architectural and construction details (some of his building specifications contain page references to Loudon). But unlike Downing, Davis's overall conception of the Picturesque was shaped by earlier generations of landscape gardeners.

engravings of Kent's temples and Capability Brown's lakes, and references to Claude's paintings.<sup>30</sup>

This is important to understanding Davis's readings of the landscape gardening literature. His readings weren't simply narrow lessons about horticulture or one particular style of landscape gardening, but a broad liberal education. For Davis and his Hudson River clients, who also avidly read these books, landscape gardening was a form of cultural education, a "school of taste," that was linked all the way back to the Classical age.

In terms of the direct application to his Hudson Valley projects, three landscape gardening authors proved to be the most influential for Davis: Repton, Whately, and Loudon. In addition to these authors, Davis also utilized designs drawn from the related literature of English "villa books."

### **Picturesque Villa Books**

Landscape gardening has always included architecture as a subject in its compositions. So it is not surprising that in addition to volumes devoted to purely horticultural concerns, the landscape gardening tradition also created a voluminous stream of architectural pattern books that provided designs for the specialized building forms appropriate to landscape gardens. Called "villa books" in their day, these publications were enlivened by colorful aquatint engravings of garden structures and houses in suitably picturesque landscape settings. And while they included designs of structures from the extensive

---

<sup>30</sup> For example, *William Marshall's Planting and Ornamental Gardening: a practical Treatise*, that Davis was studying in 1830, contained a long reprinted section of Horace Walpole's *Essay on Modern Gardening* (1782); a widely influential history of English landscape gardening that traced the origins of the field back to the Classical Age.

landscape gardens of the aristocracy, their target market was the emerging British middle class.

One of the first of this new genre of books was John Plaw's *Rural Architecture or Designs, From the Simple Cottage to the Decorated Villas* (1785). The frontispiece of Plaw's book (figure 2.13) featured an elaborate circular villa of Plaw's own design dramatically set on a peninsula on a lake. This composition relates to the pastoral landscape gardens at Stowe and Stourhead. But while Plaw conceptualized his design as a garden temple in the tradition of Kent, he has scaled the structure up to the size of a house (figure 2.14).<sup>31</sup> Other plates illustrate designs for thatched rustic cottages, entrance lodges, and garden buildings intended as ornaments and focal points on a larger estates. These designs fit within the mainstream landscape gardening tradition. But to satisfy the needs of his clientele, Plaw also offered designs for "small houses suitable for the environs of a town or village." In his house designs, Plaw somewhat awkwardly attempts to combine the "rough" picturesque landscapes of Price and Knight with what is, in essence a suburban house (figure 2.15).<sup>32</sup> But whatever its failings, Plaw's pioneering work, with its roots in the landscape gardening tradition and its eyes on the emerging middle class, set an enduring pattern that stretched well into the nineteenth century. Other characteristic English works in this vein include Thomas Malton's *An Essay on Rural Architecture* (1803) and Peter F. Robinson's *Rural Architecture* (1822) a book that featured elaborate lithographs of his cottage designs in full picturesque landscapes (figure 2.16).

---

<sup>31</sup> This strategy is similar to Sir William Chamber's design for the Casino at Marino, discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>32</sup> Later villa books called this form the "compact suburban villa." In England, the architectural form became prevalent in the metropolitan areas surrounding larger cities by about 1800. In America, similar forms of early suburban development began to appear around New York, Philadelphia, and Boston around 1830.

Over time, the picturesque landscape gardening impulse of these designs diminished and “villa books” became part of the general stream of Victorian eclecticism, offering house designs in many styles (Tudor Gothic, Italianate, Grecian) and for every pocketbook.<sup>33</sup> Loudon’s *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Village Architecture and Furniture* (1833), which Davis owned and frequently turned to for both design and construction details, was part of this later development.

A.J. Davis’s only publication *Rural Residences* (1838) was a conscious attempt to adapt the English picturesque villa book form for an American audience. In fact, *Rural Residences* borrows its title and something of its visual style from a villa book by J.B. Papworth called *Designs for Rural Residences* (1818).<sup>34</sup> In his characteristically brief preface, which he terms an “advertisement” for *Rural Residences*, Davis acknowledges the pronounced inferiority of American houses to “those who are familiar with the picturesque Cottages and Villas of England.” (figure 2.17)<sup>35</sup> A close reading of this advertisement, reveals multiple connections to both English villa books and the larger landscape gardening tradition which they are part of. Davis’s writes that “Defects are felt not only in the style of the house but in the want of connexion with its site, - in the absence of appropriate offices, - well disposed trees and shrubbery, and vines, - which accessories give an inviting and habitable air to the place.”<sup>36</sup> Scholars have long

---

<sup>33</sup> Only some of these designs were of sufficient size and architectural pretension to be considered “villas,” in the sense defined by Loudon.

<sup>34</sup> Davis owned both this work and another by the same author entitled *Hints on Ornamental Gardening* (1823).

<sup>35</sup> Davis’s “familiarity” with these forms, however, was strictly through villa books since he did not travel beyond the United States.

<sup>36</sup> A.J. Davis, *Rural Residences, Etc. Consisting of Designs, Original and Selected, for Cottages, Farm-houses, Villas, and Village Churches* (New York: by the author, 1837), 1.



pointed to this phrase as evidence of Davis's concern for landscape, which was unusual for American architects of the period.<sup>37</sup> Davis's comments, however, are closely modeled on a phrase in Loudon's *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture and Furniture* (1833) that makes clear the source of Davis's concern. Loudon wrote: "The principal defect of English Villas is the want of sufficient union between the house and its grounds; or in other words, of cooperation between the Architect and landscape-gardener in fixing on situations and laying them out."<sup>38</sup> Other phrases in Davis's advertisement provide additional clues about the English landscape gardening concepts and models that guided his project. Davis praises the English Collegiate style for admitting of "a greater variety of plan and outline" and being "susceptible to additions from time to time," echoing Repton's frequent commentary on the advantages of the Gothic style for country houses.<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, Davis praises this style for giving a "pictorial effect to the elevation" alluding to the painterly techniques of composition used in landscape gardening. Lastly, Davis states "the principal object aimed in these designs has been to give as much character to the exteriors as possible."<sup>40</sup> Here, Davis is referencing Thomas Whately's conception of landscape "character" that will be discussed in more detail in the next sections.

---

<sup>37</sup> See for example Susanne Brendel-Pandich, "From Cottages to Castles: The Country Homes of Alexander Jackson Davis" in *Alexander Jackson Davis: American Architect 1803-1892* (New York: Rizzoli Intl, 1992), 60.

<sup>38</sup> Davis had purchased Loudon's encyclopedia in 1835 so he had ready access to this work during the preparation of *Rural Residences*. Loudon included the same comment in a number of his publications. It was also repeated verbatim by Downing in his *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841). John Claudius Loudon, *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture* (London: Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1833), 763.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, *Rural Residences*, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

## Landscape Gardening and Architectural Redesign

While the word “picturesque” has been trivialized to modern eyes by overuse, during the early eighteenth century, it represented a major revolution in thinking about the relationship of the house to the landscape. In the picturesque mode, the architecture of the main house no longer was conceptualized as an independent object but was instead viewed and often re-worked to form part of an overall landscape scene. This was an inversion of Renaissance and Baroque era classicism where the architecture dominated the landscape, and formal parterres, avenues, and shrubberies literally carried the geometry and proportions of the main house into the landscape (figure 2.18). This shift was fully comprehended and intended by Pope and Burlington and it contained a strong coded political message.<sup>41</sup>

A corollary of this picturesque logic was that architectural transformation and redesign were part of the tradition from the very beginning. If one proceeded by first consulting “the genius of the place” before undertaking any program of change, then existing buildings also needed to conform to the principal “character” that was being developed through the scheme of landscape improvement. Hence, existing houses were Gothicized or Classicized, extended or truncated, raised or lowered, as needed by the overall landscape composition.

Given this view, it is not surprising that some of the earliest and most important projects of the first stage of the picturesque involved redesign rather than new construction. In 1715, Alexander Pope purchased a small house on the banks of the Thames in Twickenham. Shortly thereafter, he hired James Gibb to expand

---

<sup>41</sup> Lord Burlington, Alexander Pope and Addison were all associated with political parties (principally the Whigs) that defined themselves in opposition to the “absolutism” of the William and Mary era. In their writings, they associated the clipped topiaries and “command-and control” aesthetic with the old regime. In its place, they argued for new “liberty” in the garden and the political sphere.

and classicize this house into a three-story Palladian villa. In 1720, his friend William Kent was retained to add a classical portico to the river elevation (figure 2.19), and over the next two decades the two collaborated on the gardens that included Pope's famous grotto. Between 1738-40, William Kent employed the Gothic style to transform the exterior of Rousham House, adding crenellations to the main house and adding wings as part of an overall landscape transformation (figure 2.20). These two projects inspired Pope's neighbor in Twickenham, Horace Walpole, to remodel a vernacular cottage into an entire faux Gothic castle Strawberry Hill (figure 2.21). From this period forward, there is a long tradition of architectural re-design associated with landscape gardening and literary figures that stretches from Sir Walter Scott (Abbotsford 1818-23) to James Fenimore Cooper (Ostego Hall 1832-34) and Washington Irving (Sunnyside 1835-50), to A.J. Davis's "picturesque transformations" in the Hudson Valley (1836-1870).

### **Thomas Whately: Buildings as Nature, Objects, and Characters**

While the landscape gardening tradition demoted architecture from the leading position, it recognized buildings as coequal with other parts of the landscape. According to influential authors such as Thomas Whately, buildings, in fact, were a form of Nature, and as such, worthy of respect and sensitivity in their handling. He wrote: "Nature, always simple, employs but four materials in the composition of her scenes, *ground, wood, water, and rocks*. The cultivation of nature has introduced a fifth species, the *buildings* requisite for the accommodation of man."<sup>42</sup> To Whately, all of the components of Nature, including buildings, had a dual status as both "objects" and "characters."

---

<sup>42</sup> Whately, 2.

As “objects,” buildings could be used to distinguish, or to break, or to adorn the scenes to which they are applied.”<sup>43</sup> And Whately provides clues on visually connecting buildings with the scene that would later be employed by A.J. Davis. He writes of buildings, “yet an oblique is sometimes better than a direct view; and they are often less agreeable objects when entire, than when a part is covered, or their extent is interrupted; when they are bosomed in wood, as well as backed by it; or appear between the stems of trees which rise before them or above them: thus thrown into perspective, thus grouped and accompanied, they may be as important as if they were quite exposed, and are frequently more picturesque and beautiful.”<sup>44</sup>

The importance of buildings, for Whately, went well beyond the strictly visual. As he wrote, “the same structure that adorns as an object may also be expressive as a character... it may be grave, or gay; magnificent or simple. And given their size and importance in a landscape, buildings could play a leading role in developing or expressing the character of a place: the overall goal of the art. According to Whately “but mere consistency is not all the merit that buildings can claim: their characters are sometimes strong enough to *determine, improve, or correct* that of a scene.”<sup>45</sup>

But exactly what was “character” in this eighteenth century conception? To Whately, and other English landscape gardening writers, character was linked to sensibility and the related concept of associationism. According to Whately, “certain properties, and certain dispositions of objects of nature are adapted to

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>44</sup> These were lessons that would become a fundamental part of A.J. Davis’s visual style both in his watercolor views and his wood engraving illustrations for Downing’s publications.

<sup>45</sup> Whately, 124.

excite particular ideas and sensations."<sup>46</sup> For buildings, these "properties" included the outline of the building against the sky, the overall architectural style and coloring, the play of light and shadow on their surfaces, and impact of time and decay on their features, and the way they fit into the landscape and were approached. But the focus was not these properties in and of themselves but the degree to which they contributed to a consistent overall emotional state, mood, or idea. "An assemblage of the most elegant forms in the happiest situations is to a degree indiscriminate, if they have not been selected and arranged with a design to produce certain expressions; an air of magnificence or of simplicity, of cheerfulness, tranquility, or of some other general character, ought to pervade the whole; and objects pleasing in themselves, if they contradict that character, should therefore be excluded."<sup>47</sup> And character went beyond first impressions: "the powers of these characters are not confined to the ideas which the objects immediately suggest, for these are connected to others, which inevitably lead to subjects, far distant perhaps from the original thought, and related to it only a similitude in the sensations they excite."<sup>48</sup> As William Ackerman has described it, "character, then, is a structuring force quite distinct from that of form – one that induces the observer to focus on elements of design through ideas and memories."<sup>49</sup> To an artist like A.J. Davis, this was a very powerful conception, which both elevated architecture (it could define the character of the scene or place) and linked it to a broader artistic purpose, all within the context of landscape gardening.

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 153.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ackerman, 218.

## **Landscape Gardening and the Conservation and Preservation of Buildings**

Although much indiscriminate destruction of properties was made in the name of improvement during the middle decades of the eighteenth century, by the time of Price, Repton, and Knight, the consensus had shifted to a more conservative and sensitive approach to handling the landscape and the remains of the past. Rather than simply being swept away in the name of improvement, storm-damaged trees, disused manor houses, and irregular weathered cottages and stables, were increasingly preserved and made the centerpiece of landscape scenes. This practice was pursued for a variety of different reasons. For some, like Uvedale Price, the motivation for preserving such structures was primarily visual. Buildings that had been exposed to the elements for many years and had developed weather stains, cracking, and biological growth, embodied the picturesque quality of “roughness,” which gave interest and variety of color to their surfaces. And the more the process of decay had intervened, the more picturesque the result. To others, time-weathered structures were expressive of character; they stimulated “certain sensations of regret, of veneration, and compassion.”<sup>50</sup> Whately, writing in 1770, was among an early group of landscape gardeners to mark the significance of standing vernacular buildings: “nor are these [sensations] confined to the remains of buildings which are in disuse; those of an old mansion raise reflections on the domestic comforts once enjoyed, and the ancient hospitality which once reigned there.”<sup>51</sup> While the English appreciation of ruins (both real and faux) had long been established, and there was growing antiquarian interest in Gothic architecture prompted by such writers and landscape gardeners as Horace Walpole, the concern for vernacular buildings was new. Contained in the landscape gardening tradition,

---

<sup>50</sup> Whately, 132.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

then, are some of the earliest glimmers of what would later become the English preservation movement.

### **Humphry Repton and the Architecture of Alteration**

In the writings and works of Humphry Repton, these initial glimmers of the preservation impulse became fully visible and came to the forefront. In his second book, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803), Repton made a remarkably direct and impassioned plea for the preservation of historic structures:

A general idea persists that, in most cases, it is better to rebuild than repair a very old house; and the architect often finds less difficulty in making an entirely new plan, than in adopting judicious alterations: but if a single fragment of the grandeur of former times, whether of a castle, or an abbey, or even a house, of the date of Queen Elizabeth, I cannot too strongly enforce the propriety of preserving the original character of such antiquity, lest every hereditary mansion in the kingdom should dwindle into the insignificance of a modern villa.<sup>52</sup>

While architects had occasionally made arguments for saving individual buildings in the past, such as Sir John Vanbrugh's published defense of Woodstock Manor at Blenheim (1710), Repton was probably the first to make preservation a major part of his professional career. Humphry Repton did not wish to preserve these ancient structures solely as Picturesque "objects." Instead, he wished to ensure their preservation by continued use, a strikingly modern idea. For Repton, the challenge was to provide for modern comfort and convenience in an old or ancient structure "without mutilating its original style and character."<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Humphry Repton, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, including some remarks on Grecian and Gothic Architecture*, (London: H. Repton, 1803), 299.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 296.

As the leading professional landscape gardener of his generation, with prominent clients throughout England, Repton was in a unique position to actually put this into practice. His career trajectory took him steadily in the direction of projects that involved architectural transformation of old houses rather than simply the planting of trees, arrangement of views and drives, and excavations of lakes. To execute these projects, Repton first partnered with architects William Wilkins, John Nash, and later his son John Adey Repton who had trained under Nash. Repton's three major works, *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1795), *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803), and *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscaping Gardening* (1816), are filled with numerous case studies of architectural redesign and addition projects completed in the context of large scale landscaping improvements, illustrated by aquatint engravings of the "before" and "after" views taken from his famous "red books." These books formed a rare and important repository of practical lessons that were closely read by A.J. Davis.

Repton's innovative blending of the practice of architecture and gardening was in sharp contrast to the typical professional model of the late eighteenth century.<sup>54</sup> Even though landscape gardening had always included architecture as a subject of composition, in practice they tended to operate as separate disciplines. Large-scale improvements were pursued by an uneasy coalition of architects, landscape gardeners, engineers, land agents, and contractors assembled by the proprietor, each with their own ideas of what should be done.

---

<sup>54</sup> William Kent, the founder of the tradition, operated both as a professional architect and as a landscape designer. Capability Brown partnered with Henry Holland on a number of project before turning architect at the end of his career; a move for which he was severely criticized at the time. These were the exceptions to the rule however.



The results were highly uneven and often unconnected. Repton invented the red books as a way of getting his complete proposals for both buildings and landscape adopted. “To make my designs intelligible, I found that a mere *map* was insufficient; as being no more capable of conveying the idea of a *landscape*, than the *ground-plan* of a house does of its *elevation*.”<sup>55</sup> Repton, like Davis, leveraged his skills as a watercolorist to create an overall landscape picture or series of pictures that guided the whole work. Repton had worked as a professional illustrator in his early years, supplying architectural views of countryseats to Armstrong’s *History and Antiquities of Norfolk* (1781) and Peacock’s *The Polite Repository* (1788-1790).<sup>56</sup> In his many architectural and landscape improvement projects, Repton served as an overall visualizer and coordinator for these projects rather than a contractor for the individual project steps. This model of professional practice was strikingly similar to the way A.J. Davis operated in later years.<sup>57</sup>

In *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1795), Humphry Repton stated, “to my profession belongs chiefly the external part of architecture, or a knowledge of the effect on the surrounding scenery.”<sup>58</sup> Working in this mode, Repton argues for the Gothic restyling of Welbeck on picturesque and utilitarian grounds “the

---

<sup>55</sup> Humphry Repton, *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (London: H. Repton, 1795), 31.

<sup>56</sup> Also, like Davis, Repton translated his skills as an “architectural composer” of existing landscape views into new compositions for prospective ones.

<sup>57</sup> Operating primarily as a solo practitioner, Davis required the skills of builders, surveyors, and frequently his clients to execute his designs. While he, and other architects of the period, developed the formal tools of building specification, working drawings, Davis’s watercolor views, which determined the mood and character of the buildings and landscape, served as the primary document.

<sup>58</sup> *Op cit.*, 53.

outside case of a harpsichord does not improve the tone of the instrument, but it decorates the room in which it is decorated: thus it is as an ornament to the beautiful grounds at Welbeck that I contend for the external improvement of the house (figure 2.22)."<sup>59</sup> He further commended the Gothic style for its flexibility of planning additions: "But in altering the house, we may add a room to any part of the building without injuring the picturesque outside, because an exact symmetry, so far from being necessary, is rather to be avoided in a Gothic building."<sup>60</sup> At this point in his career, though, Repton's engagement with architecture is only "skin-deep," mirroring that of his early mentor Uvedale Price.

By his second book (1803), Repton's own experience working with Nash, and his extended public debates with Knight and Price, had brought home the lesson that buildings were not only "objects" or "characters" in landscape pictures but places organized for human habitation and use. "I shall introduce some remarks on a subject which has much engaged my attention, viz., the adaption of buildings not only to the situation, character, and circumstances of the scenery, but also to the purposes for which they are intended; this I shall call *characteristic architecture*.<sup>61</sup>" Repton begins this section with a detailed account of how English house planning had changed since the time of Henry VIII (figure 2.23), noting changes in the uses of rooms and the arrangement of offices and stables. His point is not to show the superiority of modern over historical forms but to point out that each was carefully adopted to the social customs and manners of its time: "Who, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, would have planned a library, a billiard room, or a conservatory? Yet these are deemed essential to comfort and

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 303.

magnificence: perhaps in future ages, new rooms for new purposes will be deemed necessary.”<sup>62</sup> To provide for uncertain future needs, Repton recommends an elastic approach to planning; a preference A.J. Davis would also later advocate.

In looking historically at the development of the English house, Repton notes that even utility could be taken too far: “Our ancestors were so apt to be guided by utility, that they imagined it was in all cases a substitute for beauty: and thus we frequently see ancient houses surrounded not only by terraces, avenues, and fish-ponds, but even stables, and the meanest offices, formed a part of the view from the windows of their principal rooms. I am far from advocating a return to these absurdities.”<sup>63</sup> Repton does argue for the reintroduction of formal terraces to anchor the house in the landscape and provide an all-season walk as well as the return of the kitchen garden near the house, both in the name of convenience. A.J. Davis followed Repton’s lead, incorporating terraces and balustrades in many of his projects including Montgomery Place.

In such major projects as Corsham House (1796) (figure 2.24), Ashton Court (1801), and Stanage Park (1803), Repton directly confronted the stylistic challenges of adding to a historic building: “It may perhaps be objected, that we must exactly follow the models of a style or date or else we make a pasticcio, or confusion of discordant parts. Shall we imitate the thing and forget its application? No: let us rather observe how, in Warwick Castle, and in other great mansions of the same character, the proud baronial retreat “of the times of old” has been adapted to the purposes of modern habitation.”<sup>64</sup> In this response, Repton comes out strongly in favor of utility rather than rising tide of

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, 310.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 304.

exact historicist duplication of the Gothic. In parsing this difficult issue, Repton still favored the use of carefully studied historical detail, but based room planning and massing decisions on the intended use; a composite approach that A.J. Davis would also follow. In a prescient note that echoes future debates on restoration in preservation circles. Repton notes the futility of trying to scientifically duplicate historic forms in restoration work: “it has been observed, that the age of every manuscript is as well known to the learned antiquarian, from the letters or characters, as if the actual date were affixed. The same rule obtains in architecture. And even while we profess to copy the models of a given era, we add those improvements or conveniences that modern wants suggest; and thus, in after ages the dates will never be confounded.”<sup>65</sup>

## **Conclusions**

Over the course of a century, English landscape gardening developed as a rich cultural tradition that went far beyond horticulture and embraced the Classical traditions of villa life, the art of painting, architecture, and ethics of preservation and restoration. In time, the tradition, and its associated body of literature that was eagerly read by A.J. Davis in the early 1830s, served as a form of cultural education, a “school of taste” in a century that believed that good taste might be objectively defined and taught. These lessons were reinforced in virtually all of the works discussed above. Even the “villa books,” which were focused on the latest house designs, included synopses of the history of gardening, quotations from Virgil and Pope, excerpts from the poems of Knight and the philosophy of Price, as forms of cultural credentialization to recommend their offerings. In America during the early 1830s, the “school of taste” represented by landscape gardening was just beginning to be known among members of the urban cultural

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 294.

elites who had traveled abroad and/or began purchasing the increasingly available stream of British publications on the subject.

So what did English landscape gardening mean to Davis and his clients? Simply put, I believe Davis's collaborations with Donaldson, Bronson, Livingston and Barton, and Morse were understood by both client and architect to represent "picturesque improvement" in the broad eighteenth century English sense: large-scale transformations of landscape and buildings to create unified artistic compositions in harmony with the "character" and "situation" of their setting. The English landscape gardening tradition provided Davis and his clients with a shared language of the Picturesque with which to communicate and judge the results. And the large scale and dramatic Hudson Valley setting of these properties offered Davis a broad canvas on which to experiment with the full range of picturesque effects including winding approaches, carefully framed "landscape pictures," rustic pavilions and hermitages, vine-embowered trellises, graperies, and bold prospect towers.

But the influence that this tradition exerted on Davis went far beyond general project framing and cultural education. Works such as Thomas Whately's *Observations on Modern Gardening*, which Davis called "*the classic on modern gardening*,"<sup>66</sup> provided a conceptualization of the art form which both celebrated architecture (as richly expressive of character) and made it part of a larger whole. The notion of character helps explain Davis's careful attention to color, and lighting, and mood in his watercolor renderings of buildings in landscape. These were not simply artistic flourishes, but efforts to express/define the "character" and artistic meaning of the whole scene. And as we shall see in reviewing his working drawings and sketches in the case studies, it was these successive attempts at establishing "character," in the distinct eighteenth century English

---

<sup>66</sup> A.J. Davis, quoted in Peck, 60.

sense, that shaped A.J. Davis's architectural transformations and landscape embellishments.

Also highly relevant to Davis's projects was the tradition of architectural re-design that existed within Landscape Gardening from the beginning, and early conservation/preservation ethic that informed the work of Humphry Repton and John Claudius Loudon. Even if they were not ancient, existing buildings contributed to the character of the scene, and like natural features, should be handled in a respectful way.

Repton's work, in particular, provided concrete, visual lessons of how to employ architectural as well as landscape transformation to create a unified character for the landscape scene in a sensitive and thoughtful way. His attention to internal as well as external house planning also deeply influenced A.J. Davis. While Repton's commissions for the huge estates of the English aristocracy would inform the transformation projects of Davis's later career such as Lyndhurst, Loudon brought the tradition down to a scale that was more in line with Davis's American clients of the 1830s and 1840s. The education that A. J. Davis received from English Landscape Gardening, then, was rich and multi-faceted. It entered into his work in many different ways, that I will explore in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Figure 2.1



Nicholas Poussin, *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion*. 1648. The Walker Art Gallery.

Figure 2.2



William Kent. Stowe House, Buckinghamshire, The Temple of Ancient Virtue, 1730-1740. The British Museum.



Figure 2.3



Claude Lorrain. *Landscape with Jacob and Laban and his Daughters* (circa 1654). Collection at Petworth. National Trust.

Figure 2.4



Coplestone Warre Bampflyde. *Watercolour of Stourhead* (circa 1750s). Stourhead Collection. National Trust.

Figure 2.5



Jacob Ruisdael. *Landscape with Dead Tree* (circa 1650-60). Cleveland Museum of Art.

Figure 2.6



Richard Payne Knight. "Shaved Landscape" from *The Landscape: a didactic poem* (1794)

Figure 2.7



Richard Payne Knight. "Landscape in Picturesque Mode" from *The Landscape* (1794).

Figure 2.8



**FIG. 13.—Example of the Beautiful in Landscape Gardening.**

Andrew Jackson Downing. "Example of the Beautiful in Landscape Gardening" from *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841).

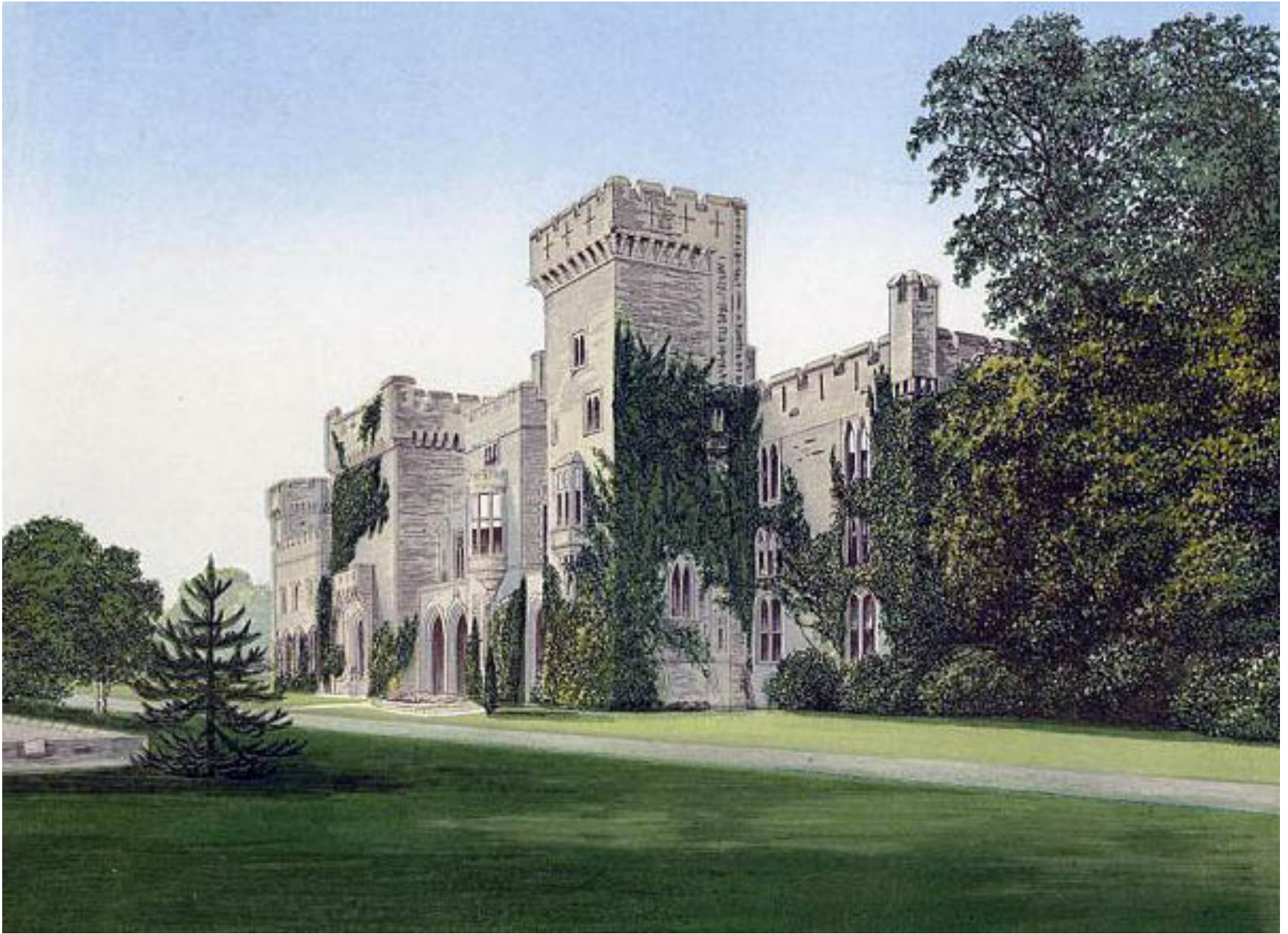
Figure 2.9



**FIG. 16.—Example of the Picturesque in Landscape Gardening.**

Andrew Jackson Downing. "Example of the Picturesque in Landscape Gardening" from *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841).

Figure 2.10



Richard Payne Knight, Downton Castle, circa 1772-78. From *Morris's Country Seats* (1880). Image: Wikipedia.

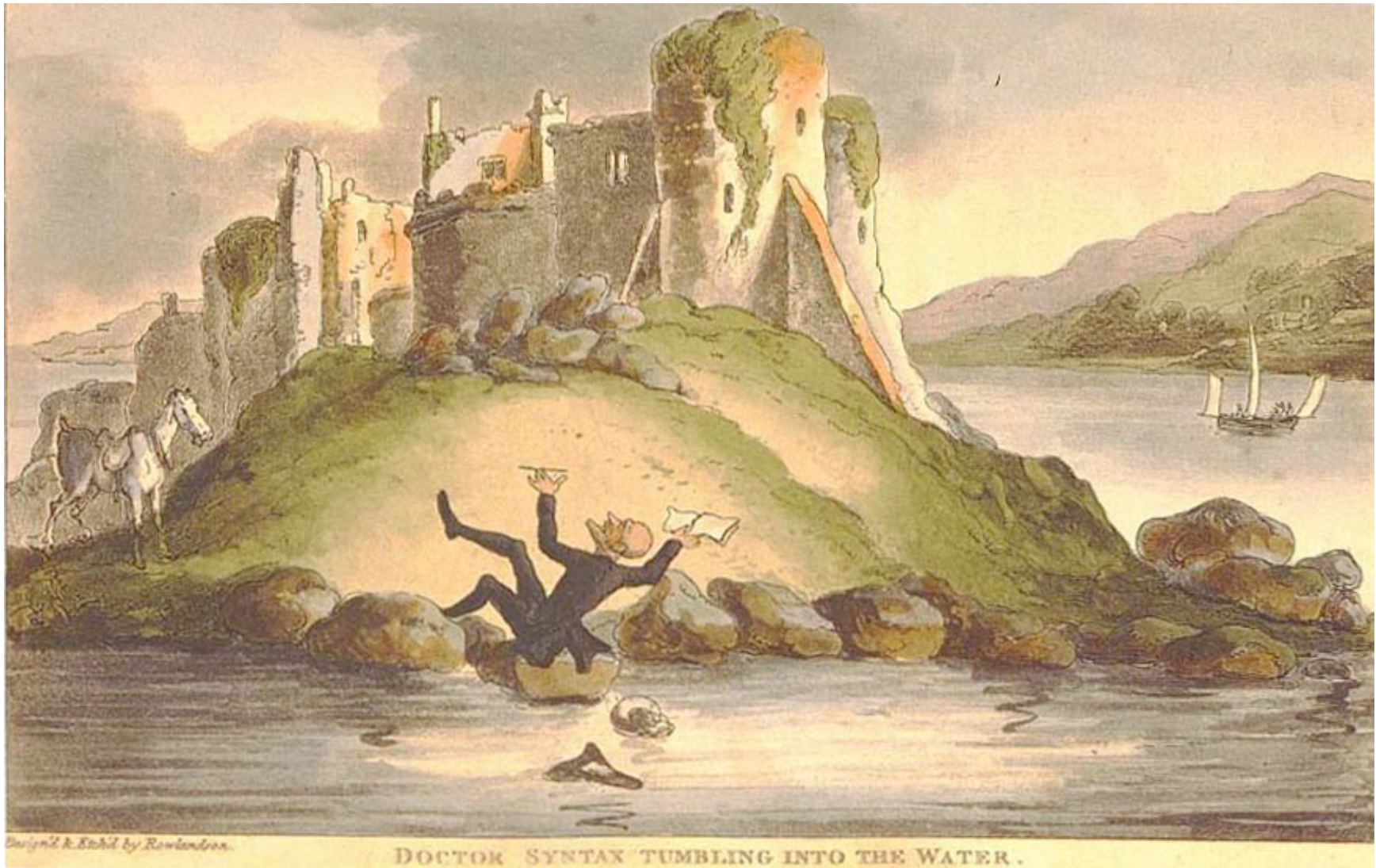
Figure 2.11



A.J. Davis, Landscape View of Ericstan, (1856-58). MMA.



Figure 2.12



Thomas Rowlandson. Doctor Syntax Tumbling into the Water, from *Dr. Syntax in Search of the Picturesque* (1823), Esther T. Mertz Library, New York Botanical Garden.

Figure 2.13



John Plaw. Frontispiece from *Rural Architecture or Designs, from the Simple Cottage to the Decorated Villa* (1785).

Figure 2.14



John Plaw. Plate XXVIII from *Rural Architecture or Designs, from the Simple Cottage to the Decorated Villa* (1785).

Figure 2.15



John Plaw. Plate VII from *Rural Architecture or Designs, from the Simple Cottage to the Decorated Villa* (1785).

Figure 2.16

Pl. 8.



P. F. Rob. del. Geo. A. C. Harding

Engraved by C. Phillips

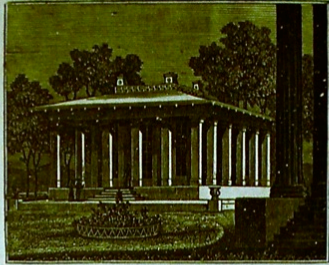
DESIGN NO 2.

London, Published by Redway, F. Martin, 110, Strand Street, Feb. 7, 1832.


Peter Frederick Robinson, Design #2 for a Gate Lodge, from *Rural Architecture*, 3d Edition, 1828.

Figure 2.17

RURAL DESIGNS.



ADVERTISEMENT.



THE following series of designs has been prepared in compliance with the wishes of a few gentlemen who are desirous of seeing a better taste prevail in the RURAL ARCHITECTURE of this country.

The bald and uninteresting aspect of our houses must be obvious to every traveller; and to those who are familiar with the picturesque Cottages and Villas of England, it is positively painful to witness here the wasteful and tasteless expenditure of money in building.

Defects are felt, however, not only in the style of the house but in the want of connexion with its site,—in the absence of appropriate offices,—well disposed trees, shrubbery, and vines,—which accessories give an inviting and habitable air to the place.

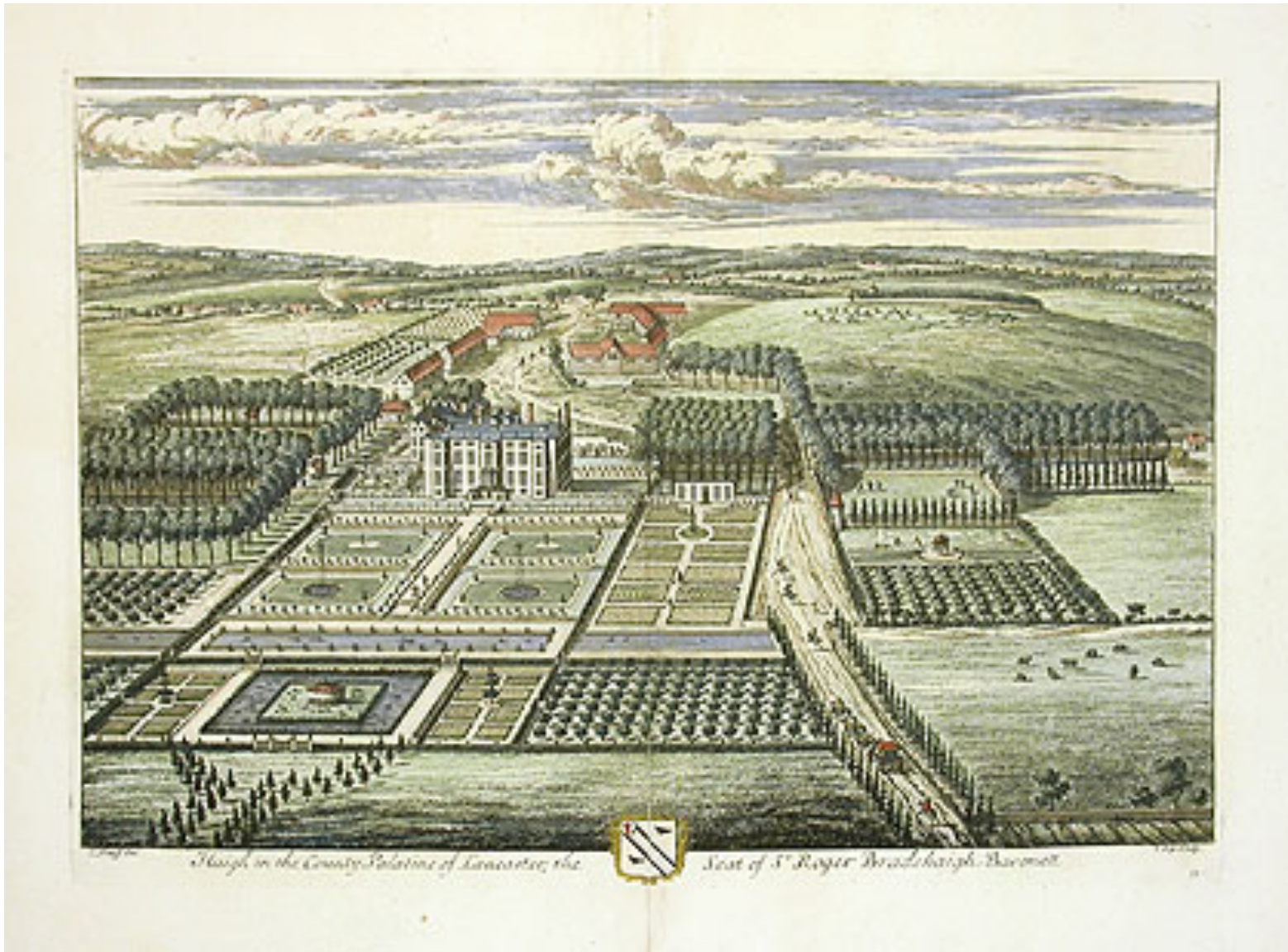
The Greek Temple form, perfect in itself, and well adapted as it is to public edifices, and even to town mansions, is inappropriate for country residences, and yet it is the only style ever attempted in our more costly habitations. The English collegiate style, is for many reasons to be preferred. It admits of greater variety both of plan and outline;—is susceptible of additions from time to time, while its bay windows, oriels, turrets, and chimney shafts, give a pictorial effect to the elevation.

The principal object aimed at in these designs has been to give as much character to the exteriors as possible;—should they answer in any degree the purposes for which they were projected, the architect may submit, at a future period, designs for more expensive structures.

A. J. D.

A.J. Davis. Advertisement from *Rural Residences* (1838). Avery.

Figure 2.18



Johannes Kip, View of Haigh in County Palantine, Lancaster, from Britannia Illustrata (1707).

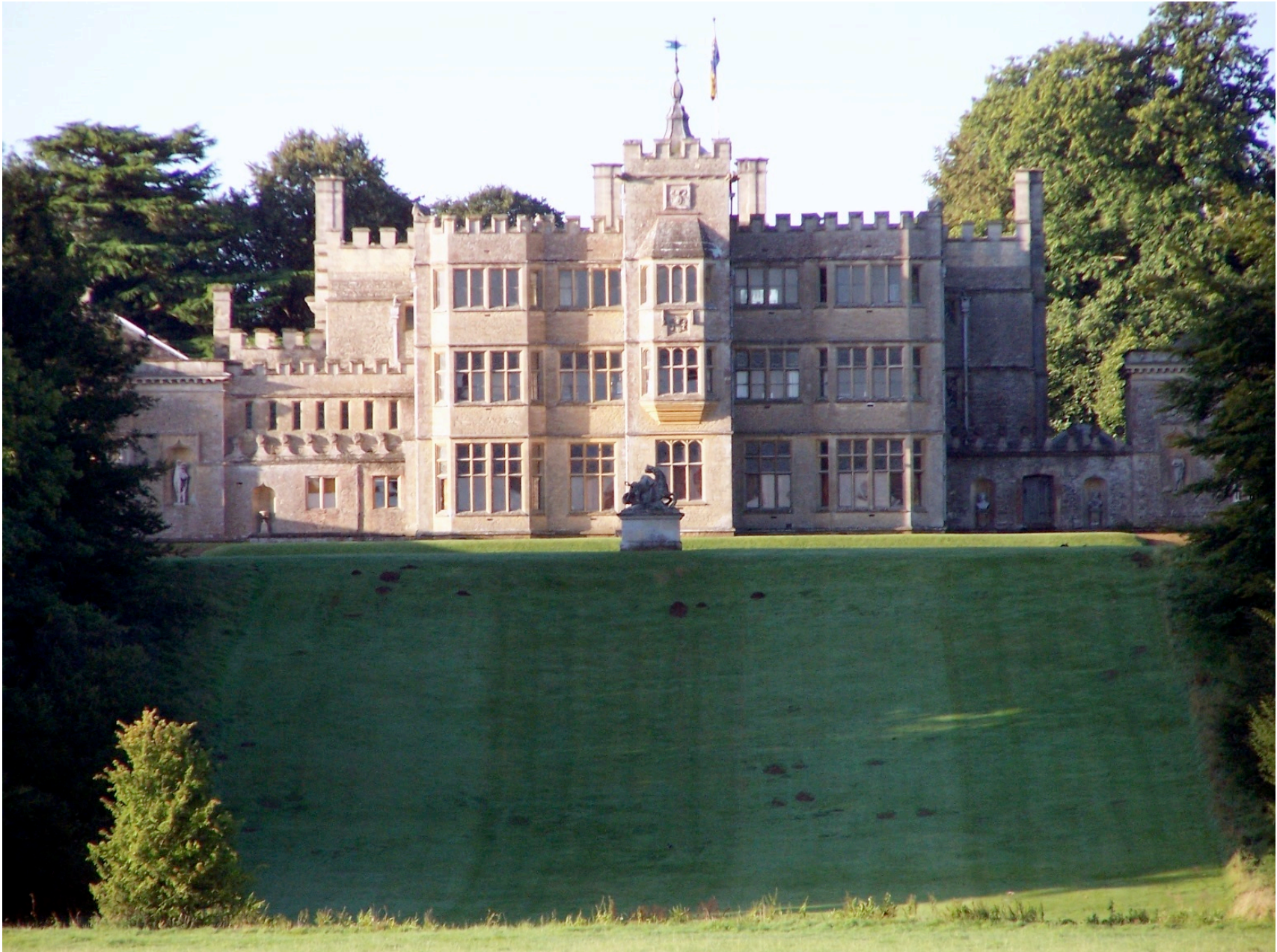
Figure 2.19



View of Alexander Pope's Villa, Twickenham, 1740s, source: Wikipedia.



Figure 2.20



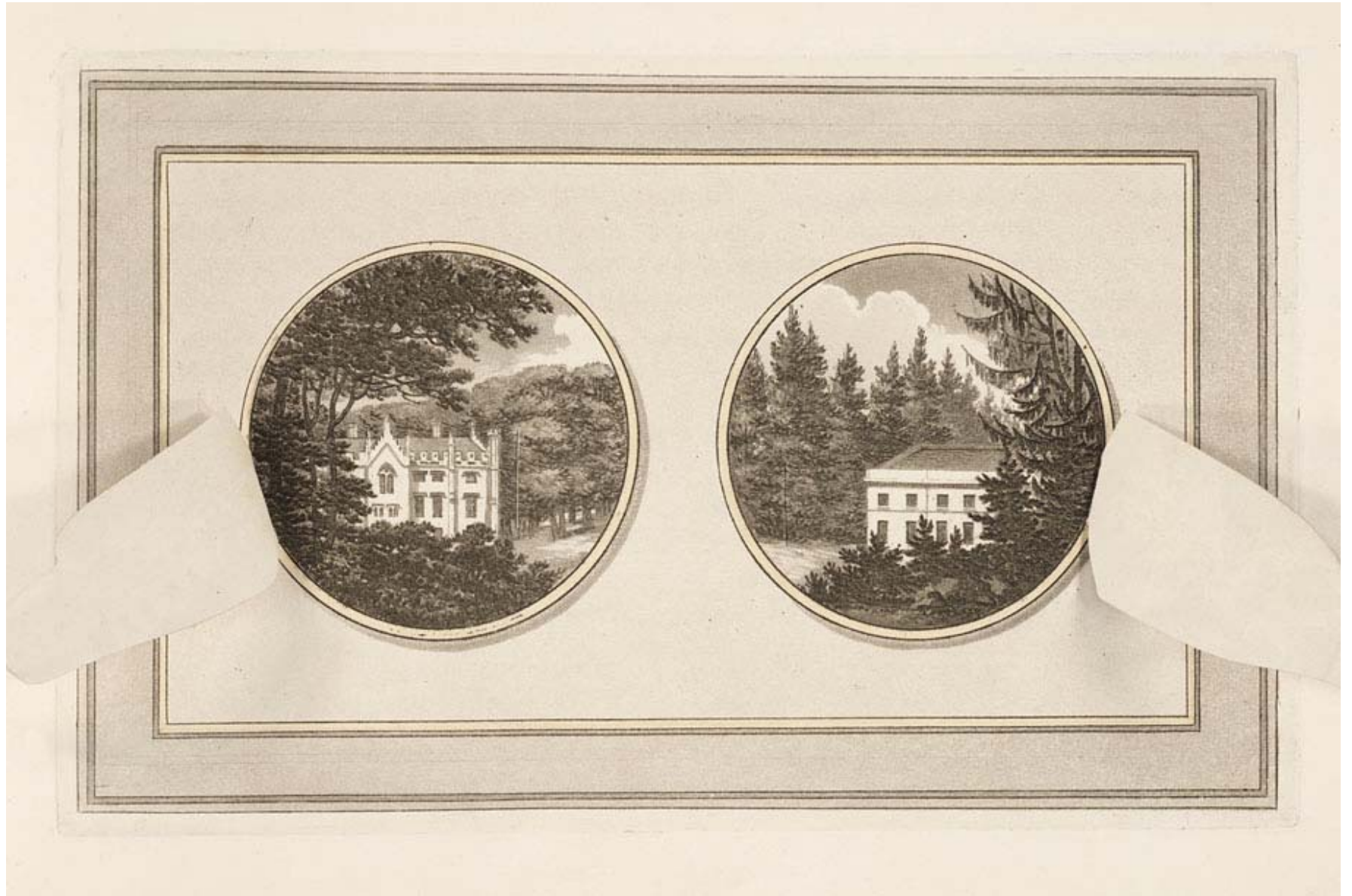
William Kent. Gothic-style additions to Rousham House. (circa 1730s). Image: Wikipedia.

Figure 2.21



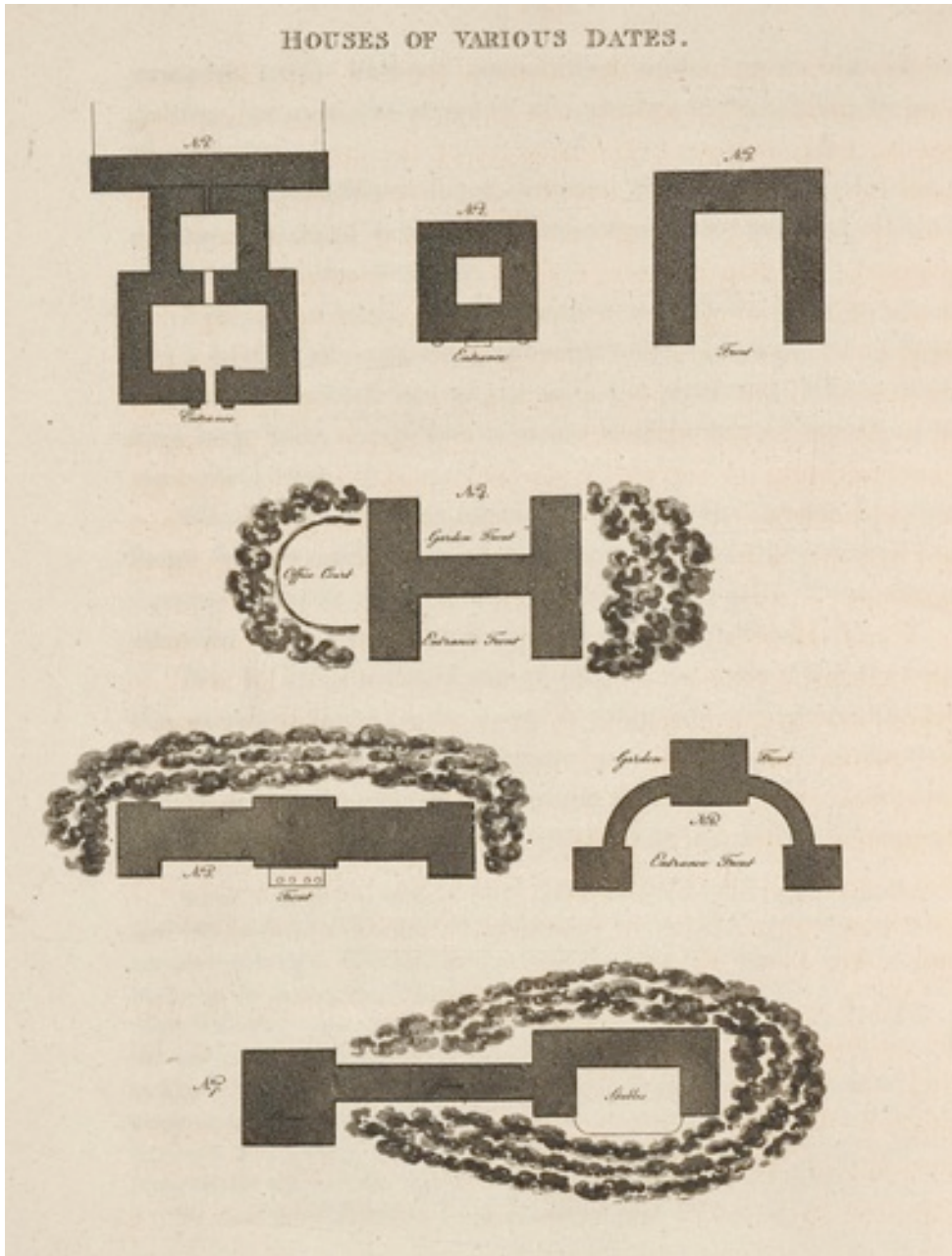
Johann Heinrich Müntz, Strawberry Hill, circa 1755-59. Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Figure 2.22



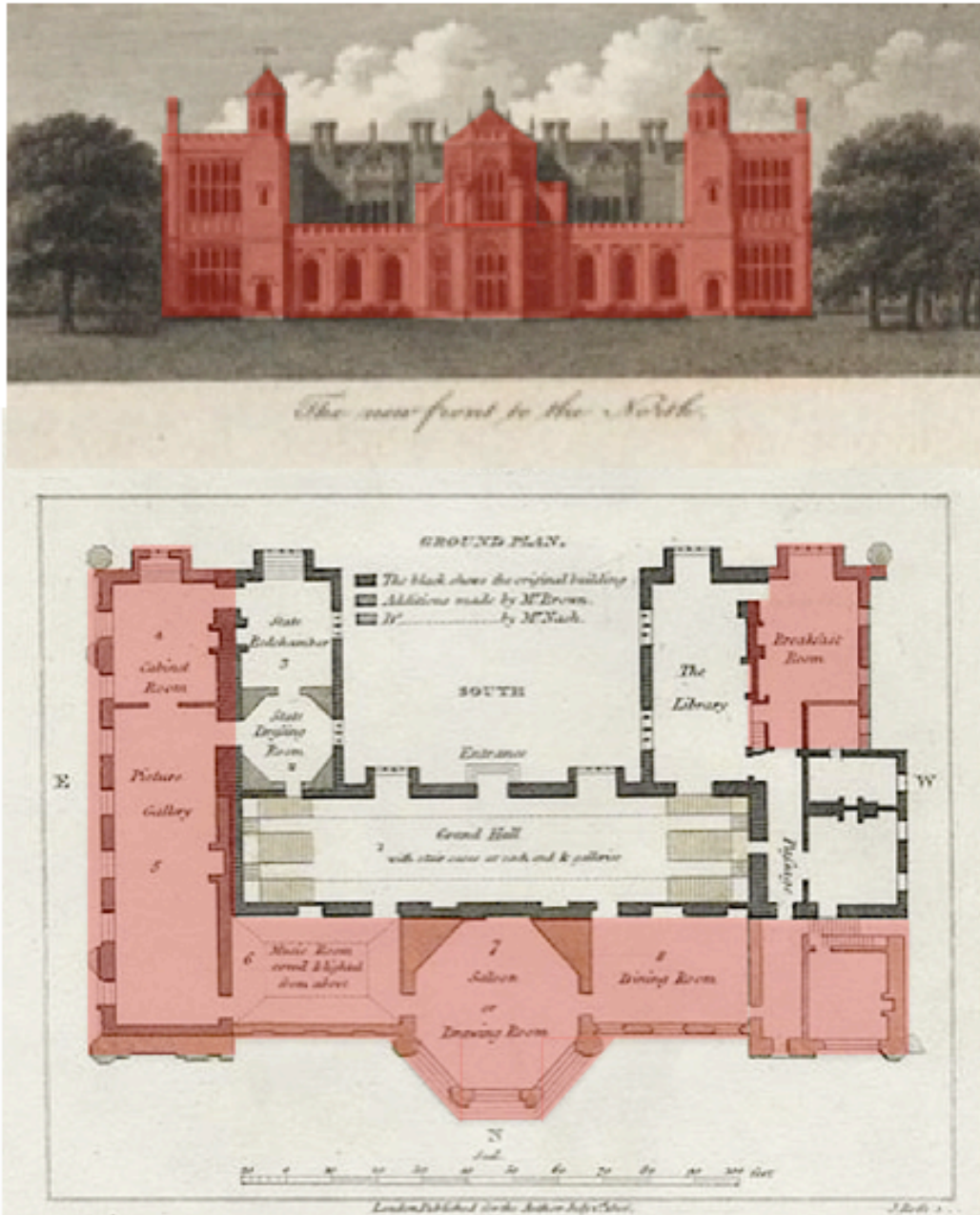
Humphry Repton, Before (Right) and after (Left) of Welbeck architectural transformation, from *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1795).

Figure 2.23



Humphry Repton, House plan evolution from *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803).

Figure 2.24



Humphry Repton. Corsham House (additions in red) from *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Picturesque Transformations:**

**Blithewood (1836-1850)**



## Overview

The former Blithewood estate is located on the east bank of the Hudson River in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York in Northern Dutchess County, approximately eighty-five miles north of New York City. The original house was built by John Armstrong, Jr. (1763-1843) and his wife Alida Livingston (1761-1822) in 1795. Robert Donaldson (1800-1872) and his wife Susan Gaston Donaldson (1808-1866) purchased the house and 95 acres in 1835. Robert Donaldson and A.J. Davis collaborated on this seminal transformation of house and landscape between 1836 and 1850. Major milestones in this process include the picturesque embellishment of the main house with an ornamental verandah and bracketed eaves (1836), the construction of the first rustic cottage-style gate house (1836), the construction of the second hexagonal Italianate-style gatehouse (1841), the Italianate tower addition to the east elevation (road frontage) of the main house (1842), the installation of the picture gallery (1845) and the creation of various ornamental garden structures. In 1852, the Donaldson's sold Blithewood and move south to a property called Sylvania (later Edgewater). The Blithewood

property was acquired by St. Steven's College in 1897 and the original house was torn down in 1900 and replaced by a Neo-Georgian mansion nearby. Both are now part of the Bard College campus. The only surviving structure from the Donaldson period is the second gatehouse that stands at the entrance to the college on Blithewood Avenue. Some remnants of the original designed landscape also exist including portions of the white pine (*pinus strobus*) allée planted by the Armstrongs.

### **Historical Background**

In 1818, Robert Donaldson, then eighteen years old, embarked on a fateful trip down the Hudson River on a steamboat. He had recently graduated from the University of North Carolina, and still lived in the town of his birth: Fayetteville, North Carolina. His journal records his experience on the steamboat:

[P]assed the celebrated Scenery of the Hudson at Night, but got up in the middle of the Night & Saw the Highlands, by a Full Moon – which no doubt was more Sublime, than if seen in the Day – as obscurity adds to Sublimity – saw West Point. The Banks are lined with elegant villas – thought it the consummation of Earthly Bliss to live in one of those Palaces, on such a Noble River, under such a Government.<sup>1</sup>

Donaldson's remarks show an awareness of the Romantic currents that were just beginning to stir in America including the notions of the Sublime and the Beautiful.<sup>2</sup> For a young man living in an inland river port in North Carolina,

---

<sup>1</sup> Biographical information on Robert and Susan Gaston Donaldson in this section is derived from Jean Bradley Anderson's *Carolinian on the Hudson: The Life of Robert Donaldson* (Raleigh North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Donaldson, quoted in Anderson, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson relates that Donaldson had in his possession on his Hudson River trip multiple editions of the Philadelphia literary magazine *Port Folio* (published 1801-27) that may have been the source of his knowledge about English picturesque theory. Anderson, 55.



these were rather rarified views. But Donaldson, like his future partner, A.J. Davis, was always a man of advanced tastes cultivated by disciplined habits of reading and careful observation.

The loss of both his father and his mother at the age of eight forced Robert Donaldson to assume a leadership role in his family at a very early age. His father in Fayetteville and uncle in London had developed a substantial import-export business that eventually had operations in Charleston, South Carolina, Norfolk, Virginia, New York, and London.<sup>3</sup> This business was carried out through a complex set of partnerships that were thrown into disarray by the Napoleonic Wars and the death of Donaldson's father. Many of the firm's outstanding claims dated to before the Revolutionary War.

In 1820, two years after his Hudson River steamboat trip, Donaldson made his first voyage to England to unwind the complicated affairs of his uncle who had recently died. During this trip, which is believed to have lasted two years, Donaldson experienced the arts in London, had his portrait painted by American expatriate artist Charles R. Leslie (figure 3.1), visited kin in Scotland, and traveled to Paris, all the while gaining an advanced education in financial and legal matters. By the mid-1820s, Robert Donaldson had managed to restructure all the assets and collect the debts from the partners of his father and uncle's complex and far-flung business. This and subsequent profits from investing and real estate transactions in North Carolina established the basis of Donaldson's fortune. By 1827, at the age of twenty-seven, he had accumulated sufficient wealth to return to New York and purchase a large townhouse at 15 State Street,

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Donaldson, Sr. and his brother Samuel Donaldson were Scottish merchants who participated in the transatlantic trade selling British finished goods in America financed by American raw materials. Robert had emigrated to America in 1762. His brother Samuel had also lived in America, but as a Loyalist, was forced to leave during the Revolutionary War.

directly overlooking the Battery.<sup>4</sup> Still unmarried, he lived in the house with his two brothers and sisters who had moved up with him. Several months later, Robert Donaldson met his future wife Susan Gaston (figure 3.2), the daughter of a prominent New Bern, North Carolina judge with a wide network of professional colleagues across the Eastern seaboard.

From the very beginning of his time in New York, Robert Donaldson worked to establish himself as a leading patron of the arts. He and his wife entertained frequently at their elegant home on State Street and quickly became prominent members in the same elite circle of artists and patrons that A.J. Davis frequented. In 1828, Donaldson lent paintings to the American Academy of Fine Art annual exhibition which put him in the company of such leading collectors as Philip Hone, the former mayor of New York, Joseph Bonaparte, the exiled brother of Napoleon, and Dr. David Hosack, professor of botany at Columbia College and owner of a noted Hudson River estate in Hyde Park that featured English-style landscape gardening.<sup>5</sup> Davis and Donaldson probably met sometime in the later 1820s, perhaps through Ithiel Town who had executed projects in North Carolina. In May of 1831, Davis received his first commission from Donaldson to redesign the doorway and railing of his home near the Battery.

By 1832, Donaldson was already looking beyond the city to the Hudson Highlands that had inspired him on his moonlight steamboat trip. In September 1832, Susan Donaldson wrote her father in New Bern that “Mr. D seems so disposed to select a site for a country house & to employ himself in landscape gardening that we are going to see a situation above West-Point that is

---

<sup>4</sup> Donaldson had lived with his family in New York for a brief period (1805-1808) before his father’s death. So his return in his late twenties was especially poignant. The house he purchased had been built by Archibald Gracie, of Gracie Mansion fame.

<sup>5</sup> Both Davis and Donaldson visited Hyde Park on multiple occasions. Town & Davis also remodeled the main house Hyde Park in 1831 in the Greek Revival style.

represented as a kind of terrestrial paradise.”<sup>6</sup> Some time during the following year, Donaldson purchased this twenty-two acre site in Fishkill Landing (now Beacon), New York and engaged A.J. Davis to design a new villa.<sup>7</sup> In December, 1833, Davis recorded in his Day Book “1833 Dec 15 Mr. Donaldson called to look for a Gothic Villa in books and a design for a residence. I studied out several.”<sup>8</sup>

The sources which Davis and Donaldson used to locate suitable designs would undoubtedly have been English villa books in Town & Davis’s library. The following year, on November 1, 1834, Davis accompanied Donaldson on a visit to Fishkill “to look at the proposed site for a villa in Eng. Collegiate stile [sic].”<sup>9</sup> This elaborate design was not executed but Davis later published a lithograph of it in *Rural Residences* (1838) (figure 3.3). He also appears to have created an alternative design for the site in 1834 in an Italianate style complete with a campanile (figure 3.4).<sup>10</sup> If the attribution is accurate, this design predates Davis’ earliest recorded Italianate design for James Smille (which was started but not completed) by several years.

The terse Day Book entries do not make clear how far advanced the design was before Davis first saw the site. Had he and his client simply picked the

---

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, 155.

<sup>7</sup> The timing and details of this transaction are unclear. Also the extremely long gestation time between Donaldson’s first visit to the site (September 1832) and his site visit with Davis in November, 1834 is uncharacteristic of Donaldson.

<sup>8</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 158.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>10</sup> This watercolor sketch is included in a scrapbook at the Metropolitan Museum. There is a note in pencil that identifies the sketch, probably executed later in Davis’s career as “Country Villa at Fishkill, Robert Donaldson, 1834, not executed. J.B.D.” The initials stand for Joseph Beales Davis, Davis’s son, who later attempted to catalog his father’s work.

architectural style of the new house by the time of the visit or had the design largely been completed independent of actual site conditions? The multiple states of the Fishkill composition with pointed conifers and ominous clouds (see figure 3.3) and round-headed trees and sunny skies (figure 3.5), show that Davis was still struggling to fix the “character” of the landscape. And relative to his later watercolor renderings, there is something unconvincing about the way the house sits in the landscape. Clearly, both Donaldson and Davis, despite their shared appreciation of English landscape gardening from books, had much to learn about the subject.

Shortly after the November, 1834 site visit to the Fishkill parcel, the project was dropped and Donaldson purchased a new and substantially larger property further up the Hudson in the town of Red Hook.<sup>11</sup> In July of 1835, Susan Gaston Donaldson, again wrote to her father announcing that “Mr. D has bought a beautiful country seat on the river & our present plan is to pass our summers there & have a house for the winters in Carolina.”<sup>12</sup> The property that the Donaldson’s purchased was called “Annandale,” and consisted of a 95-acre riverfront parcel with an existing house.

---

<sup>11</sup> The hamlet in which the property is located was later renamed Annandale-on-Hudson some time during the second half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Gaston Donaldson, quoted in Anderson, 161.

## History of the Site: Mill Hill and Annandale<sup>13</sup>

The site that was transformed into Blithewood during the 1830s and 1840s by the Donaldsons had been called “Mill Hill” by its former owners, General John Armstrong, Jr., and Alida Livingston.<sup>14</sup> Mill Hill was literally that; a house built on a dramatic bluff on the Hudson that overlooked saw and gristmills operating on the Saw Kill, a creek that ran below the house. Mill Hill was the second of three properties developed by the Armstrongs on a 410-acre riverfront parcel they had purchased shortly after their wedding in 1789.<sup>15</sup> The Armstrong’s property adjoined the lands of Alida’s sister Janet Livingston Montgomery; the creator of the estate that would later become Montgomery Place.

In 1796, the Armstrongs moved into Mill Hill, a large new one-and-a-half story Federal style brick farmhouse on the bluff. According to his biographer,

---

<sup>13</sup> Historical background on the development of Blithewood and other nearby properties can be found in Robert Toole’s *Landscape Gardens on the Hudson* (Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press, 2010). Additional historical information was derived from Amy Parella’s article “Annandale-on-Hudson’s Historic Estates and their Landscapes” published in the *Hudson River Valley Review* (2008) and Helen Reynolds’ *Dutchess County Doorways* (1931).

<sup>14</sup> General John Armstrong Jr. served in Continental Army during the Revolutionary War as an aide-de-camp to Generals Hugh Mercer and Horatio Gates, attaining the rank of Major by the end of the war. He later turned to political office, serving as a Pennsylvania delegate to the Continental Congress in 1787-88. In 1789, Armstrong married Alida Livingston, youngest daughter of the ten children of Margaret Beekman Livingston (1724-1800) and Judge Robert Livingston (1718-75). In later years, with the backing of the powerful Livingston family, Armstrong served as U.S Senator from New York (1801-1802, 1803-1804), Minister to France (1804-1810), and Secretary of War (1813-1814) under President James Monroe. Armstrong was also accomplished as a scientific farmer, publishing a treatise on the subject in 1816.

<sup>15</sup> The first residence built by the Armstrong’s in 1790 was called “The Meadows” and was operated as a working farm. It was sold in 1797 to Colonel John Deveaux, a South Carolina planter, who re-shaped the property into an English-style landscape gardens. The third residence was La Bergerie for which construction begun in 1812.

Armstrong served as his own architect for the project.<sup>16</sup> As part of the initial development of the site, General Armstrong planted a long sweeping avenue of eastern white pines from the public road down to the bluff. Other than the approach, the Armstrongs appear to have conducted little or no other ornamental improvements on the property.<sup>17</sup> In 1801, the couple moved to Washington D.C. and later France as John Armstrong's political career took off. When they returned to Dutchess County in 1811, they established their third property, two miles south of Mill Hill, which they named La Bergerie (the Sheep Farm).<sup>18</sup> Mill Hill was sold to Mrs. John Allen in 1801, who renamed it "Annandale." The property was then purchased by John Cox Stevens in 1810 and then conveyed to John Church Cruger in 1833.<sup>19</sup> Two years later, Robert Donaldson and his wife Susan Gaston Donaldson purchased Annandale from Cruger, paying \$19,000 for the house and 95 acres of river front land.<sup>20</sup> Cruger retained title to the mills and development rights along the creek that would later create problems for Donaldson and his Livingston neighbors to the south.

---

<sup>16</sup> C. Edward Skeen, *John Armstrong, Jr., 1758-1843: a Biography*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 37.

<sup>17</sup> Armstrong appears to have been unmoved by the new ideas of the picturesque arriving in the Hudson Valley. Speaking of his old property the "Meadows," Armstrong noted: "The wood has suffered somewhat by DeVeaux's rage for distant prospects and wide horizon" indicating his disapproval of removing productive and valuable woodlots for purely ornamental purposes. Armstrong, quoted in Toole, 39.

<sup>18</sup> La Bergerie was later renamed Rokeby by their daughter Margaret Armstrong and her husband William B. Astor.

<sup>19</sup> Blithewood chain of title from Jean Bradley Anderson, *Carolinean on the Hudson: The Life of Robert Donaldson* (North Carolina: Historic Preservation Foundation, 1996), 166. John Cox Stevens was a future client of A.J. Davis. It is unclear what additional improvements were created by these owners.

<sup>20</sup> In order to finance this purchase, Donaldson sold the 22 acre parcel in Fishkill for \$5,555 at the same time. Anderson, 166.

## **Blithewood - Original House Pre-transformation**

A pencil sketch by A.J. Davis (figure 3.6) provides a glimpse of what the original house looked like soon after the Donaldson's purchase of the estate. This drawing shows a view of the house from the southwest from a vantage point at the edge of the bluff. The house is low-slung and surrounded by an open porch on three sides with a pair of high chimneys set below the ridgeline. A buffer of hardwood trees, some apparently recently planted, shield the house from the wind. The verges of the path look somewhat rough and the open area in front of the trees looks more like a meadow than a well-mown lawn. There appears to be a line of fencing to the right of the house. A close-up of this drawing (figure 3.7) reveals additional details. A range of eight slender columns supported the porch across the front of the house. The house sits on a raised basement. The windows are covered with closed latticed shutters (Venetian blinds). There is a small projecting one-story extension off the main body of the house that is built out to the edge of the porch.

So when was this drawing executed? In his diary, Davis recorded "1836 June 16-18. At 5pm sailed by towboat Dutchess County to Barrytown, ar. Daylight - Donaldson's carriage to Blythewood."<sup>21</sup> This was the first of what would become a regular pattern of nocturnal trips to Barrytown on the "towboat."<sup>22</sup> A month later, he had completed designs for a "verandah and gatehouse for R. Donaldson, Blythewood."<sup>23</sup> He returned one more time in early August, 1836 on his way to Saratoga Springs and Lake George in the company of Asher Durand and other artists. His diary records no visits during 1837 but he returned again

---

<sup>21</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 177. His office journal also confirms this as the first time he visited Blithewood. Davis, office Journal, 55.

<sup>22</sup> Towboats were a predecessor of tugboats.

<sup>23</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol.1, 178.

in the summer of 1838. By this time, the verandah would likely have been completed, so the drawing most likely dates to his first two-day visit in June, 1836.

### **Original Floorplan**

A second pencil and pen sketch of a floorplan (figure 3.8), dated 1838 provides additional details of the interior arrangement of the original house. The house was a symmetrical five-bay composition with a shallow center hall opening to a pair of large parlors. The rear of the house contained contained service functions.

These two drawings, in combination, allow us to visualize the possible appearance of the original house when Davis first saw it (figure 3.9). Figure 3.9 shows a digital construction of the original house based on the measurements and proportions in Davis's sketches. Van Cortland Manor (figure 3.10) in Croton-on-Hudson, which Armstrong and his wife would have been familiar with, includes many of the same design features: a five bay symmetrical main house with paired interior chimneys surrounded on three sides by a wide porch supported by narrow posts over a raised basement.<sup>24</sup> While Armstrong's house is of simple form, it was of large scale (seventy-four-and-a-half feet across the front face of the porch).

### **Blithewood - Circa 1838**

Additional drawings document Davis and Donaldson's first campaign of re-design work. Figure 3.11 is an intermediate design showing the house from the same vantage points as figure 3.5. In this drawing, the drive stills sweeps in from the right but a number of the trees in front of the house have been removed.

---

<sup>24</sup> The core of Van Cortland Manor was built in the late seventeenth century as a fort but was later converted into its present form as a country house by Pierre Van Cortlandt who inherited the property in 1747.



The open porch and original post spacing is retained but the supports are now in the form of trellised posts visually capped on the roof by semi-circular foliated elements (figure 3.12). There is a lightly sketched decorative apron of scalloped elements outlining both the eave of the verandah and the eaves of the roof.<sup>25</sup> The gable eaves have been extended and now appear to be supported by brackets. There are raised elements on the roof at regular intervals that may represent the ends of battens indicating that the roof was recovered with metal sheeting. The front steps have been widened and the ground appears to have been terraced right up to the level of the porch deck on either side. Overall, the appearance of the house has been transformed through these relatively simple embellishments into that of a cottage ornée rather than that of an Anglo-Dutch farmhouse. Even in this simple pencil sketch, Davis has managed to create a distinct character for this domestic scene: sunny and cheerful, simple and close to nature. He would continue to refine this composition over time and many of the elements in this design, the open verandah with trellised posts, the bracketed eaves, the terracing around the house would be repeated in his other Hudson Valley projects.

### **The Blithewood Verandah: Sources**

It is notable that Davis did not create the verandah at Blithewood, but redesigned and ornamented an existing porch in a picturesque style. As the architectural historian Barksdale Maynard has eloquently described, the indoor-outdoor space variously called the porch, verandah, or piazza had a long history in America architecture and culture before A.J. Downing's arrived on the scene and popularized its use. And Davis would have been familiar with the Anglo-Dutch porch traditions from his sketch trips up the Hudson (figure 3.13). But the specific form of Davis's design, seen in more detail in this later watercolor (figure

---

<sup>25</sup> The "scalloping" along the eaves was either not executed or later removed since it does not appear in subsequent drawings.

3.14) was new and relates to the English landscape gardening and villa books he had been reading.<sup>26</sup> The carved leaf forms, painted green, framing the top of the view, and the trellised posts invites nature, in the form of climbing vines, right on to the porch, in keeping with early nineteenth century English picturesque sensibilities.

Trellis-work or treillage has a long history in landscape gardens and was popularized in the geometrical landscape designs of André le Nôtre (1613-1700) at Versailles and Fontainebleau. A more immediate source for Davis would have been his reading of the works of Humphry Repton and the picturesque villa books in his collection. Repton is credited with re-introducing treillage into English landscape gardens during the late eighteenth century, and his books offer multiple designs for trellised garden structures (figure 3.15). Repton also discusses the use of trelliswork as an architectural element on the main house.<sup>27</sup> Following Repton, a number of the picturesque villa books that Davis owned included cottage and house designs that featured trelliswork porches including a design (figure 3.16) from Loudon's *Encyclopedia of Cottage Farm and Villa Architecture* that Davis had purchased in August, 1835; a little less than a year before beginning his work at Blithewood.<sup>28</sup>

### **The 1836 Gatehouse**

As part of the first campaign at Blithewood of 1836, Davis also supplied Donaldson with a design for a gate house (figure 3.17). This small structure with its board-and-batten siding, steep roofs, tall chimneys, diamond-pane windows,

---

<sup>26</sup> Also visible in this watercolor on the lower edge are the names of the trees in each of the "frames" formed between the trellis supports.

<sup>27</sup> Humphry Repton, 2<sup>nd</sup> book, 158.

<sup>28</sup> Davis recorded in his Day Book, "1835 August 8 Bought Loudon's Ency. of Arch of Appleton \$14.00" Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 172.

and Tudor-Gothic drip molds proved to be incredibly influential. Historians have called it “the prototype of the American Gothic cottage.”<sup>29</sup> But many of these later accounts fail to mention the original context and purpose of this building. It was not simply a small house or cottage, it was a “park entrance lodge.”

The picturesque gatehouse or “entrance lodge,” was a form that became popular in England during the late eighteenth century. Picturesque villa books in Davis’s library offered many designs for this form including a plate from P.F. Robinson’s *Rural Architecture* (1818) that is a likely source for Davis’s design (figure 3.18).<sup>30</sup> Robinson’s design and the style of its rendering, were in turn, derived from earlier published designs in the works of landscape gardener Humphry Repton (figure 3.19) that Davis also was familiar with.

Functionally, these structures provided lodging for a gatekeeper who monitored the comings and goings onto an estate property and opened and closed the gate. But their real purpose was to serve as “ornaments” in the landscape. A rare period photo of the gatehouse from the 1870s, shows the building in-situ (figure 3.20) after it had been converted to the gardener’s house. What is striking is the exaggerated, almost dollhouse quality of the structure. A rare working drawing provides details of how Davis envisioned the landscape scene that the gatehouse was originally part of (figure 3.21). The gatehouse was part of a semicircular

---

<sup>29</sup> Jane B. Davies, in *Alexander Jackson Davis: American Architect 1803-1892*, Amelia Peck ed, (New York: Rizzolli Intl, 1992), 15.

<sup>30</sup> Davis noted in his Day Book on May 12, 1836 (a month before his first visit to Blithewood) that he was having his personal copy of “Robinson on Rural Architecture” bound. Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 176. During the 1830s, American purchasers of English publications had the option of buying the plates loose (which was cheaper) or bound by the publisher. Davis opted to have a local bookbinder in New York bind many of his volumes, and these expense entries in his Daybook provide important clues about what books he was reading (and deemed important enough to incur the additional expense of a bound cover).

entrance ensemble bounded by a stone wall topped with rustic work. In the original arrival sequence, the visitor to Blithewood first encountered the picturesque gatehouse, “with its projecting gables and miniature porch, covered with honeysuckles and Boursault roses.”<sup>31</sup> After passing through the gate, the visitor followed the drive along an easy curve toward the house that was located a short distance away. These spatial relationships can be seen in a close-up of Davis’s lithograph (figure 3.22).

### **The 1841 Gatehouse**

In 1841, Davis designed a new entrance lodge located further away from the main house and the original gatehouse was converted into the gardener’s lodge. A rough pencil sketch of the ground plan shows the locations of both the new and old gatehouses as well as the remnants of Armstrong’s pine tree alleé (figure 3.23). The archives do not disclose Donaldson and Davis’s rationale for moving the gatehouse back to the public road, but a likely reason would have been greater privacy. Even before the publication of Downing’s first book, which brought Blithewood to the attention of a large audience, Davis and Donaldson’s first design campaign attracted a growing stream of visitors who would have been clearly visible from the main house as they approached the original gatehouse. The new gatehouse changed the arrival sequence and screened the house from the view of prying eyes.

Unlike the other structures at Blithewood that were all destroyed by 1900, the 1841 gatehouse still survives relatively intact on the present-day campus of Bard College (figure 3.24). Even in its slightly altered condition and context, it is a remarkable piece of architecture and landscape design. One of the most striking aspects of the design is the hexagonal prism form of the structure. Davis’s diary

---

<sup>31</sup> “Farm and Villa of Mr. Donaldson,” in *The American Agriculturalist and Rural New Yorker*, vol 5, 1846, 88-89.

reveals that by July of 1841, Donaldson and Davis had already settled on a hexagon for the new gatehouse.<sup>32</sup> One possible inspiration for this choice could have been a ground plan for a villa property in Loudon's encyclopedia that includes a hexagonal roofed gatehouse at the turnoff from a public road (figure 3.25).

A watercolor sketch records an early state of new gatehouse landscape (figure 3.26). Of particular interest are the lightly sketched trees in pencil that appear to record Davis's and Donaldson's composition process. How open should the view of the river be? Is a central mass of foliage necessary to balance the forms on the left?<sup>33</sup> A slightly later engraving, drawn by Davis for the second edition of Downing's *Treatise on Landscape Gardening* (1844), shows small refinements in the landscape elements of the composition (figure 3.27). A single distant conifer brings the viewer forward into the now opened up river and mountain view. But simultaneously, the old gatehouse has been partially screened from view. Lastly, a pair of trees now frames the upper gatehouse window. For Davis and Donaldson, these were not random artistic gestures but integral to the way this landscape was composed, informed by the long tradition of English landscape gardening. An 1846 article in the *American Agriculturalist* describes one visitor's impression of the completed scene: "the gate-house or lodge was the first object that attracted our attention. It is a hexagonal brick building, stuccoed and

---

<sup>32</sup> Davis wrote in his Day Book: "1841 23-24 July Walking round, sketching and studying on gatehouse (hexagon)." Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 222.

<sup>33</sup> As with Davis's other landscape views, it is unclear how exactly Davis's sketches of the gatehouse truly reflected existing site conditions. The weight of the evidence strongly suggests that these sketches reflected his design intent. And the drawings are filled with lots of specific detail indicating they were observed from nature rather than merely invented. Given that many of the trees look rather spindly in this and other sketches, it is likely that they represented either thinned woods or newly transplanted trees. So their overall fidelity to the existing scene or its near term transformed state appears quite high.

colored in imitation of freestone; and strikingly placed on a terrace in the midst of a group of forest trees, it is no less ornamental than useful.”<sup>34</sup>

In Davis’ plan, it can be seen that the hexagon of the gatehouse was set within a semi-circle (formed by a stone wall) with one corner of the hexagon carefully aligned to point to the left gate post (figures 3.28). A modern GIS image shows that, in fact, the entire building was oriented to point due north (figure 3.29). But none of this geometrical exactitude can be seen in the landscape composition which draws the viewer in between the narrow aperture of the stone walls to the open view of the mountains and river beyond.

Unlike the first gates house, which was executed in the English “rustic cottage style,” the new gatehouse is loosely Italianate in inspiration with stuccoed exterior, and a low roof with wide eaves supported by exposed rafters. But this new design was also probably derived from an English picturesque villa book source rather than an Italian original.<sup>35</sup> Cronkhill in Shropshire (1802), by John Nash (figure 3.30) is generally acknowledged by scholars as the prototype of the nineteenth century Italianate villa style and Nash modeled his design after a building appearing in a landscape painting by Claude Lorrain rather than a true Italian original. Similarly, Davis’s design fits within the picturesque tradition of loosely derived Italianate designs such as Robert Lugar’s design for an Italianate

---

<sup>34</sup>The reference to “forest trees” in this quote is somewhat puzzling. Does this reference indicate that the finished landscape scene included conifers rather than the deciduous trees shown in Davis’s sketches indicating further changes to the composition? Or is the author merely indicating that the trees were not exotic specimens but an informal, picturesque grouping of native hardwood trees? *Farm and Villa of Mr. Donaldson*, 89.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Brownell has persuasively argued that nineteenth-century rustic Italianate villa form was a creation of the English Picturesque. “The Italianate Villa and the Search for an American Style, 1840-1860” in *The Italian Presence in American Art, 1760-1820*. Irma Jaffray ed., (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 208-230.

style entrance lodge (figure 3.31) in his *Architectural Sketches for Cottages, Rural Dwellings* (1818) that includes some of the features of the new gatehouse (faceted geometric design, low roof with projecting rafters).

### **Picturesque Shadows**

According to Robert Lugar, “deep recesses and bold projections are great assistants [to the Picturesque], while the play of light and shadow, which they produce, heighten a brilliant and pleasing effect.”<sup>36</sup> The eave extensions and decorative brackets in Davis’s reworking of the main house at Blithewood are the earliest example of what Davis and Downing later called the “bracketed mode”; an extremely popular style in the Hudson Valley. Although the original house is long gone, the brackets on the surviving 1841 gatehouse allow one to see Davis’s design intent. What is immediately striking is how thin and delicate Davis’s brackets are (figure 3.32). These are not the massive Italianate brackets that supported the heavy cornices of the post-Civil War era. Aligned with the corners of the hexagonal building, these brackets visually disappear when viewed head-on. The primary role of the roof brackets and pierced bracket supports to the entranceway was visual not structural. They were designed to cast shadows; to add intricacy and irregularity to what is otherwise a rather austere design. In fact, the entire design can be viewed as a sophisticated exploration of shadows, with the carefully oriented planes of the hexagonal prism capturing the changing light conditions during the day and movement of the trees in the breeze (figure 3.33).<sup>37</sup> This explains the careful attention to the building’s siting. Davis owned Gwilt’s *Sciography, or Examples of Shadows* (1833) and was familiar with the

---

<sup>36</sup> Robert Lugar, *Architectural Sketches for Cottages, Rural Dwellings* (London: J. Taylor, 1818),10.

<sup>37</sup> I am indebted to Alan Neumann for making this observation on a site visit to the Gatehouse in June, 2011.

painterly manipulation of light and shadow detailed in the landscape gardening literature. The 1841 gatehouse is a tour-de-force of picturesque composition that works on multiple levels.

### **Picturesque View Shed Preservation**

Around the same time Davis and Donaldson were completing the picturesque transformation of the approach to the estate and planning the details of the new gatehouse, Blithewood faced the threat of another type of transformation. In late 1840, Donaldson learned that John C. Cruger, who had retained the land on the southern edge of the property along the Saw Kill, proposed to erect a factory on the site of the lower mills. While Donaldson and Davis valued Blithewood for its artistic possibilities, others still viewed the land for its productive capabilities.

In response to this threat, Robert Donaldson proposed to his neighbor Louise Livingston, that they should purchase the land. "If we buy the stream" he wrote her in January 1841, "the Mill may be removed-Our pleasure grounds extended to the creek from the Cataract to the River - & a lake for fish formed, with ornamental waterfalls - which would render the places all that could be desired."<sup>38</sup> In time, the deal was negotiated and the purchase accomplished for the price of \$6,000. This event represents an extremely early and important example of viewshed preservation in the Hudson Valley. The new purchase, with its dramatic waterfall, and the accompanying removal of the mills provided Donaldson and Davis with a new canvass to express the wilder picturesque qualities of the landscape. Davis designed a rustic bridge across the cateract leading led to a thatched pavilion from which to overlook the view. This composition was refined and recorded in a new watercolor landscape view (figure 3.34).

---

<sup>38</sup> Donaldson, quoted in Anderson, 173.



## 1842 – West Elevation Addition

In 1842, Robert Donaldson and his family moved to Blithewood full time. This move prompted the construction of a major addition to the house.<sup>39</sup> Blithewood, like most Hudson River estates, presented two primary entrances: east from the river and west from the public road. While Davis and Donaldson had devoted substantial attention to the river elevation of Blithewood, the road elevation was relatively undeveloped. This accounts for the original routing of the drive around to the front of the house with the somewhat awkward turnaround seen in figure 3.24.

As part of the 1842 building campaign, Davis and Donaldson wanted to give the road elevation its own distinct character.<sup>40</sup> Davis created an entirely new landscape scene for this elevation centered around a two-story semi-circular Italianate tower that repeated the low roof, exposed rafters, and scored stucco of the new gatehouse. The new addition featured a pair of two-story windows with a transom panel in the middle; a form that the scholar Jane. B Davies has termed “Davisean windows.” Davis repeated this form on many of his designs for both public and private buildings. The new rustic Italianate tower also included a roomy portico with benches well shaded by leafy trees (figure 3.35).

At first, it is difficult to recognize that this addition is part of the same house, so different is the form and treatment of the components. But this effect was

---

<sup>39</sup> Davis recorded a discussion of this project with Donaldson in the fall of 1841. “1841 Oct 26 Sketching view from Piazza Blithewood, and plans for addition to house.” Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 226.

<sup>40</sup> In the second edition of a *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1844), A.J. Downing discusses the problems caused by having both a road and river elevation and recommends a similar solution. “When a building is so situated, much the most elegant effect is produced by having two fronts, one the *entrance front* with the porch or portico, nearest the road, and the other, the *riverfront*, facing the water.” Downing, 318.

intentional, and linked to the way the house was conceptualized as a sequence of distinct scenes intended to embody the picturesque values of “surprise” and “intricacy.” Davis would employ this same tower strategy at both the Dr. Oliver Bronson House and Locust Grove.

A key to Davis’s design was the careful modulation of the height and massing of the tower. The relationship of the new tower to the existing house can be seen in a later watercolor dated 1850 (figure 3.36). As he does on most of his sketches, Davis carefully includes precise dimensioning information in a small hand. In this case, Davis noted the height of the eaves of the tower as twenty-two feet above the water table. Using this information, a CADD study revealed that the tower would not have been visible from the verandah side of the house. In addition, trees were strategically planted or retained to keep the architectural transitions and landscape scenes distinct when viewed from other angles.

Other Davis drawings show how this new addition was integrated into the existing floorplan (figure 3.37). The ground floor of the tower became the dining room, with the single story additions from the original house retained but re-purposed into chambers. Presumably all of the service functions were consolidated in the cellar rooms along with the kitchen.

### **1845 - The Picture Gallery**

During 1845, the Donaldsons decided to go ahead with a project they had been discussing for several years with Davis: a new “picture gallery.” The space for this new room was carved out of the existing floor plan, by borrowing part of the center hall (figure 3.38). This new room was approximately fourteen-feet by thirty-feet. Davis and Donaldson created a dramatic new space with a vaulted ceiling supported by brackets and lit by an enameled glass skylight in the roof (figure 3.39). And, as Davis’s working drawing reveals, this new volume was

largely accommodated within the original farmhouse roofline (figure 3.40). All of the windows and doors were elaborately decorated with opaque glass.

The crowning feature of the new picture gallery was an oval plate-glass window in the north wall surrounded by a heavy picture frame that Donaldson called the “landscape window.” A faint and extremely rare Davis pencil sketch reveals the possible original configuration of this innovative room feature (figure 3.41). The landscape window was set vertically within a heavy ornamented rectangular frame capped by an opaque glass transom. A photo from the 1860s from the Bard period of ownership provides a rare view of the landscape window in-situ (figure 3.42). By this period, the house had been remodeled, but the landscape window and frame had been retained and re-installed horizontally in the wall.<sup>41</sup>

The importance of the landscape window, however, goes beyond its novelty and physical form. This window literally framed the view, inviting comparison between the actual Hudson River landscape outside and the landscape paintings owned by Donaldson that were hung on the wall. Donaldson’s biographer Jean Bradley Anderson quotes the contents of a letter in which Donaldson proudly wrote to A.J. Davis “The Picture Room will be done in a Day or two – The Effect of the “Landscape Window – is fine & the landscape by the ‘Old Master’ [God] will try my Both severely,” a reference to his landscape painting by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Jan Both that hung in the room.<sup>42</sup> The landscape window made explicit to all visitors the connection between landscape gardening and landscape painting that had informed and shaped nearly a decade of collaborative work between Donaldson and Davis at Blithewood.

---

<sup>41</sup> Based on the view through the window, the landscape windows appears to have been reinstalled in the southwest front room.

<sup>42</sup> Donaldson, quoted in Anderson, 80.

## **The Mature Landscape Garden (later 1840s)**

In addition to work on the main house, Davis supplied designs for a number of ornamental garden structures at Blithewood throughout the 1840s including a springhouse (figure 3.43), grapery or greenhouse (figure 3.44), a rustic “temple of fame” and associated rustic bridge, a hermitage, an Egyptian Revival tool house and various seats and arbors. Each of these structures was carefully set within its own landscape scene. Davis and Donaldson carefully composed each of these scenes, considering various approaches, and the overall sequence of views.

Davis’s Day Book records many visits to Blithewood where he spent the day with Donaldson “walking round and sketching,” defining the way new architectural additions could be used to transform the landscape and, in turn, how clumps of trees and plantings and the evolving path system could be used to shape the experience of this architecture. By the mid-1840s, Blithewood was becoming a fully realized picturesque landscape garden.

Some time in the middle 1840s, when most of these structures were complete, Davis created a remarkable watercolor ground plan (figure 3.45) of the entire property showing not only the placement of the structures and paths but also the manner in which selective tree planting and thinning was used to reveal or screen the individual landscape components and divide areas of pleasure ground from working pastures (near the main road). Figure 3.46 isolates the path system and structures.

## **Blithewood - later History**

At the end of 1852, Robert Donaldson sold Blithewood to John and Margaret Bard for \$63,000 and purchased a nearby riverfront estate which he renamed “Edgewater.” He explained in a letter to his old friend A.J. Davis, that he had purchased the property as “a speculation” and that “I have no thought of trying

to make a Blithewood."<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, he later enlisted Davis in a series of improvement projects to the main house (an octagonal library addition) and grounds (a pair of gatehouses, a boat house, various ornamental structures).

Davis's office Journal records one small commission for John Bard for a "canopied seat," but overall Bard maintained the landscape that Donaldson and Davis had created over the prior sixteen years. The Bards, both pious education philanthropists, donated funds to build a local Sunday school and church in Barrytown. In 1860, they donated eighteen-acres of land to establish St. Steven College (later Bard College). Following the death of their son in 1868, the Bards moved to Europe and the property fell into disrepair, eventually being acquired by St. Stevens College in a foreclosure auction in 1897. Two years later, the house and grounds were sold to real estate entrepreneur Andrew C. Zabriskie and his wife who ordered the dilapidated house torn down, and retained architects Hoppin & Koen to build the current Neo-Georgian mansion on its site. In 1951, The Zabriskies son Christian donated the house and grounds to Bard College which currently uses the facility as the Levy Economics Institute.

Other than the Davis's 1841 gatehouse, no original structures remain from the Donaldson period. In 1999, however, test excavations for the new Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts uncovered the foundations of Davis's 1836 gatehouse. This discovery, in combination with historic viewshed preservation issues from the adjoining Montgomery Place historic site, prompted a move of the new structure to the north. Currently, a pair of markers on the site of the first gatehouse are all that interpret the site.

## **Conclusion**

Blithewood was a momentous experiment in translating the English Picturesque to American Hudson Valley setting. Architectural historians have long

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 230.

celebrated some of the fertile inventions of Davis' sixteen-year collaboration with Donaldson: the prototype of the American Gothic Revival cottage and the bracketed cottage ornée, the introduction of board-and-batten siding, and the vine-embowered verandah. But Blithewood was also the prototype of an American picturesque landscape that, through its publication in Andrew Jackson Downing's books, was deeply influential in American domestic culture. Over time, we have lost connection to the context for Davis and Donaldson's innovations and even to the fact that the famous engraving of the verandah at Blithewood that was reprinted constantly over later years represented a transformation of an earlier house. Also complicating our efforts to understand this project are Downing's categories of the "beautiful" and the "picturesque" which Downing borrowed from Loudon. These categories define the picturesque primarily in terms of style, and relate to the late eighteenth century "picturesque controversy." But they obscure the fact that in addition to being a style of landscape design and architecture, the picturesque was, first and fundamentally, a mode of composition.

In addition to introducing many new architectural forms to America, Blithewood represented the prototype of another kind, the picturesque transformation. For Davis, Blithewood was a career-defining project where he learned how to apply the lessons of his readings in English landscape gardening into practice. Davis's working drawings and Day Book give insight into the creative collaboration between Donaldson and Davis. While Donaldson took the lead on the horticultural front and spurred the overall project development, it was Davis's powers of artistic visualization and landscape composition, coupled with his creative use of English architectural models that made Blithewood so important and influential in its day. Davis and Donaldson's experiments in architecture at Blithewood should be read not simply as new buildings in new architectural styles but as essential parts of the overall redesign and reorientation of the landscape. They were parts of successive essays in picturesque landscape

composition that over time were unified into a comprehensive artistic experience.

Figure 3.1



C.R. Leslie. Portrait of Robert Donaldson, circa 1820.  
Collection of Richard Hampton Jenrette.

Figure 3.2



George Cooke. Portrait of Susan Gaston Donaldson, 1832.  
Collection of Richard Hampton Jenrette.

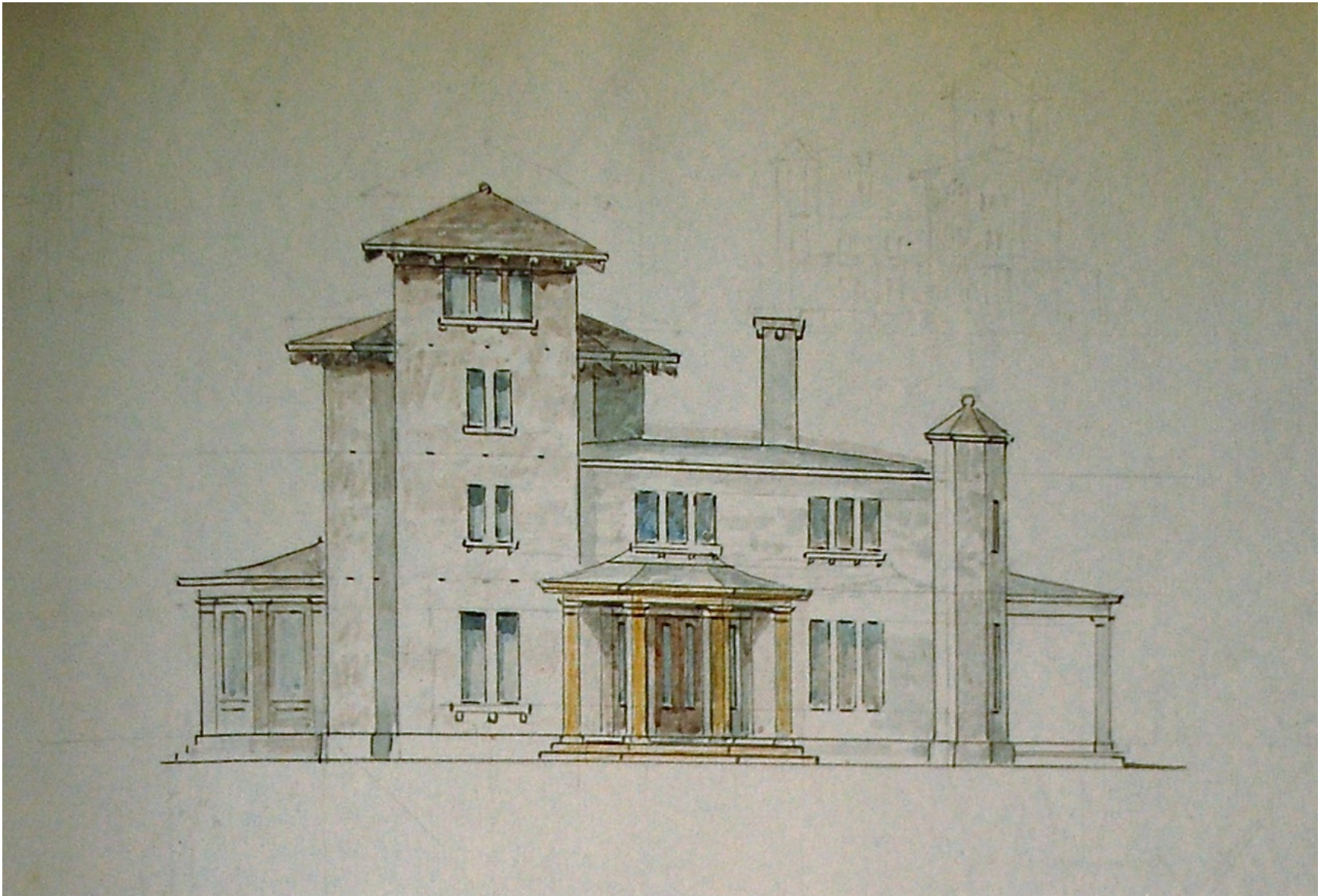


Figure 3.3



A.J. Davis. Villa for Robert Donaldson, Fishkill Landing, 1834. MMA.

Figure 3.4



A.J. Davis. Alternate design for a villa for R. Donaldson, Fishkill Landing (circa 1834). MMA.

Figure 3.5



A.J. Davis. Villa for Robert Donaldson, Fishkill Landing, alternate state, 1834. MMA.

Figure 3.6



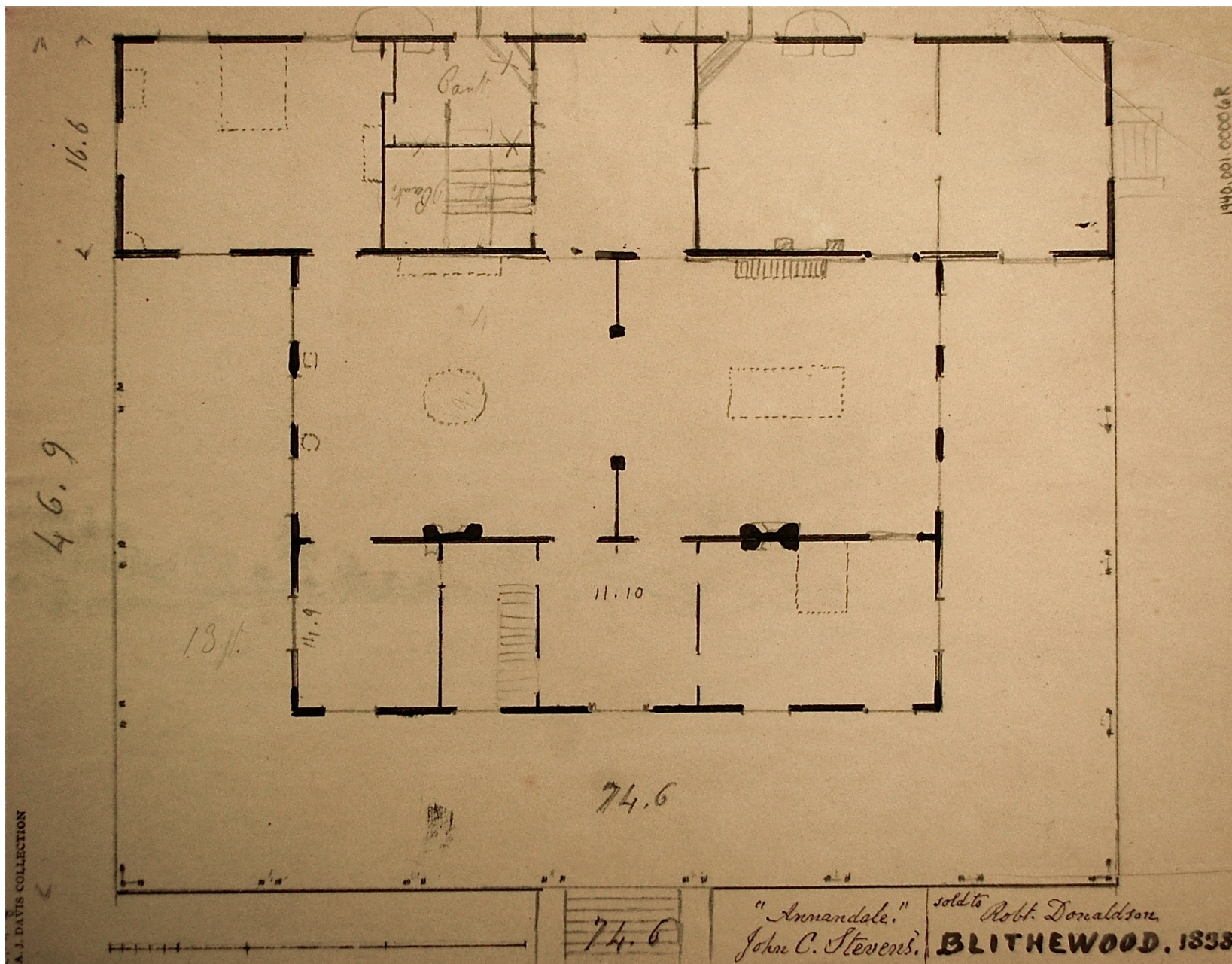
A.J. Davis. Pencil sketch of house at Blithewood before transformation, circa 1836. Avery.

Figure 3.7



A.J. Davis. Detail of a Pencil sketch of west elevation of Blithewood before transformation, circa 1836. Avery.

Figure 3.8



A.J. Davis. Floorplan of Blithewood, dated 1838. Avery.

Figure 3.9



CADD reconstruction of west elevation of Blithewood, circa 1836. Peter Watson.

Figure 3.10



Van Cortlandt Manor, Croton on Hudson. Image: Historic Hudson Valley.

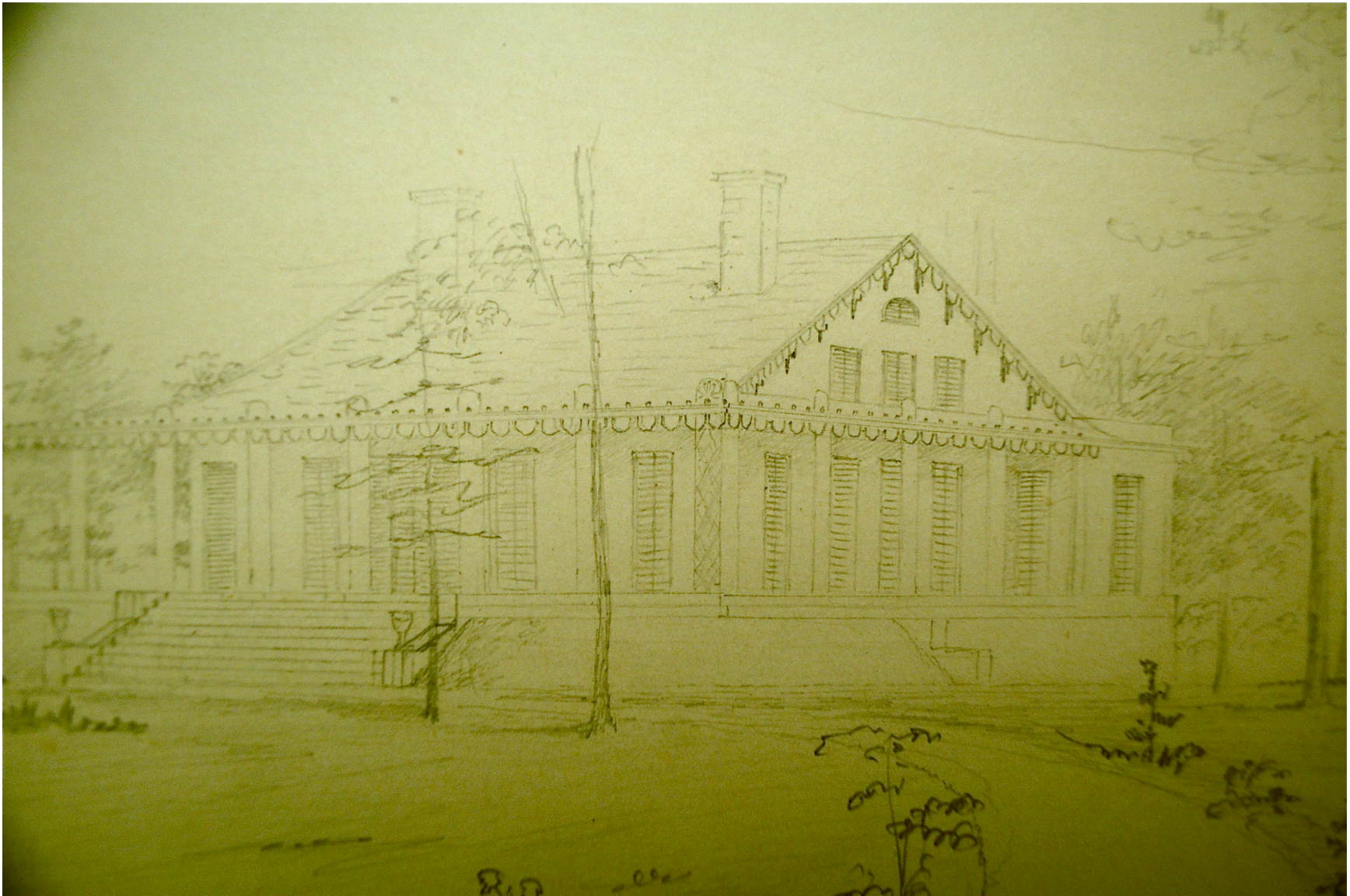


Figure 3.11



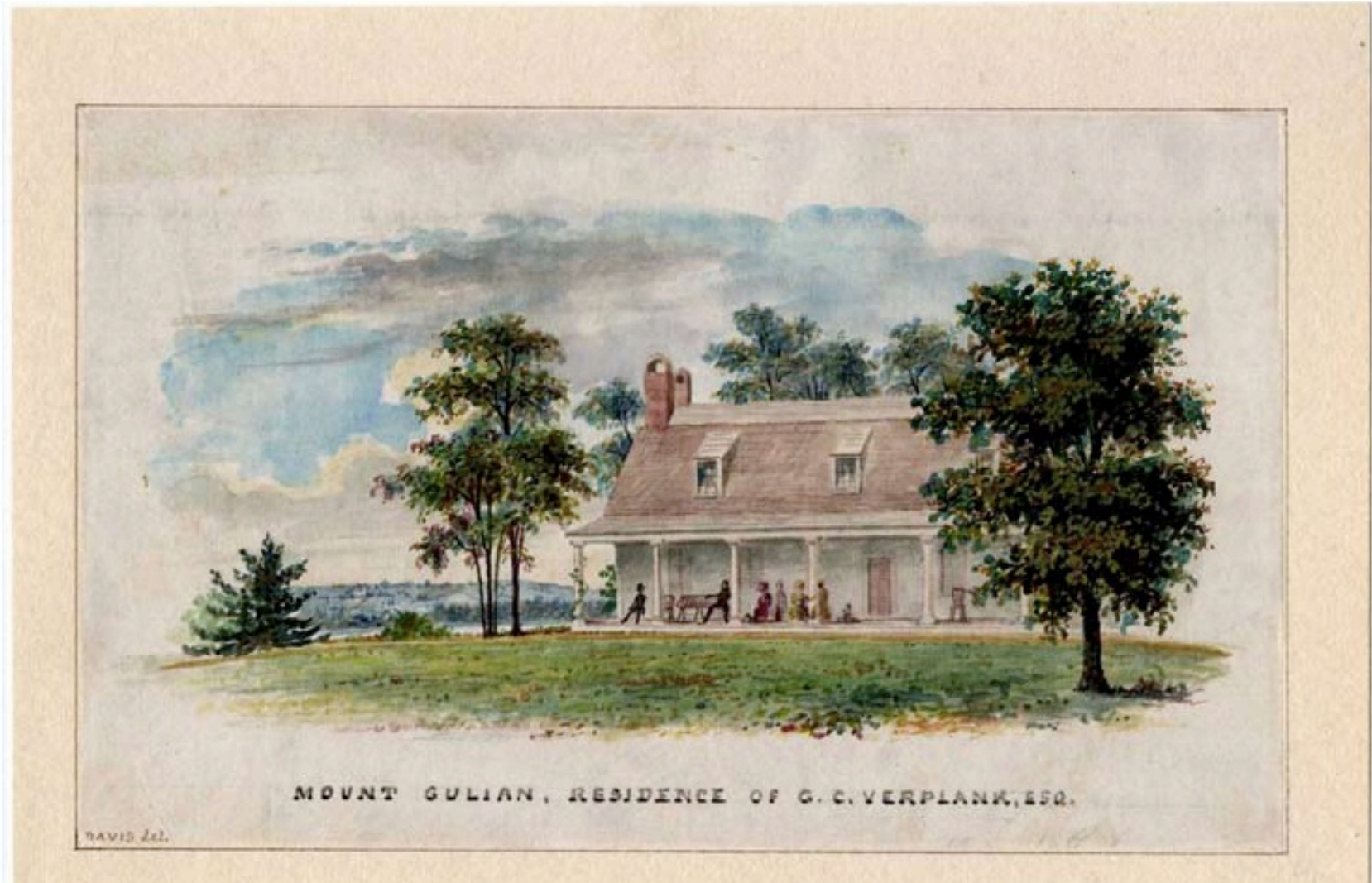
A.J. Davis. Pencil sketch of west elevation of Blithewood (circa 1836?). Avery.

Figure 3.12



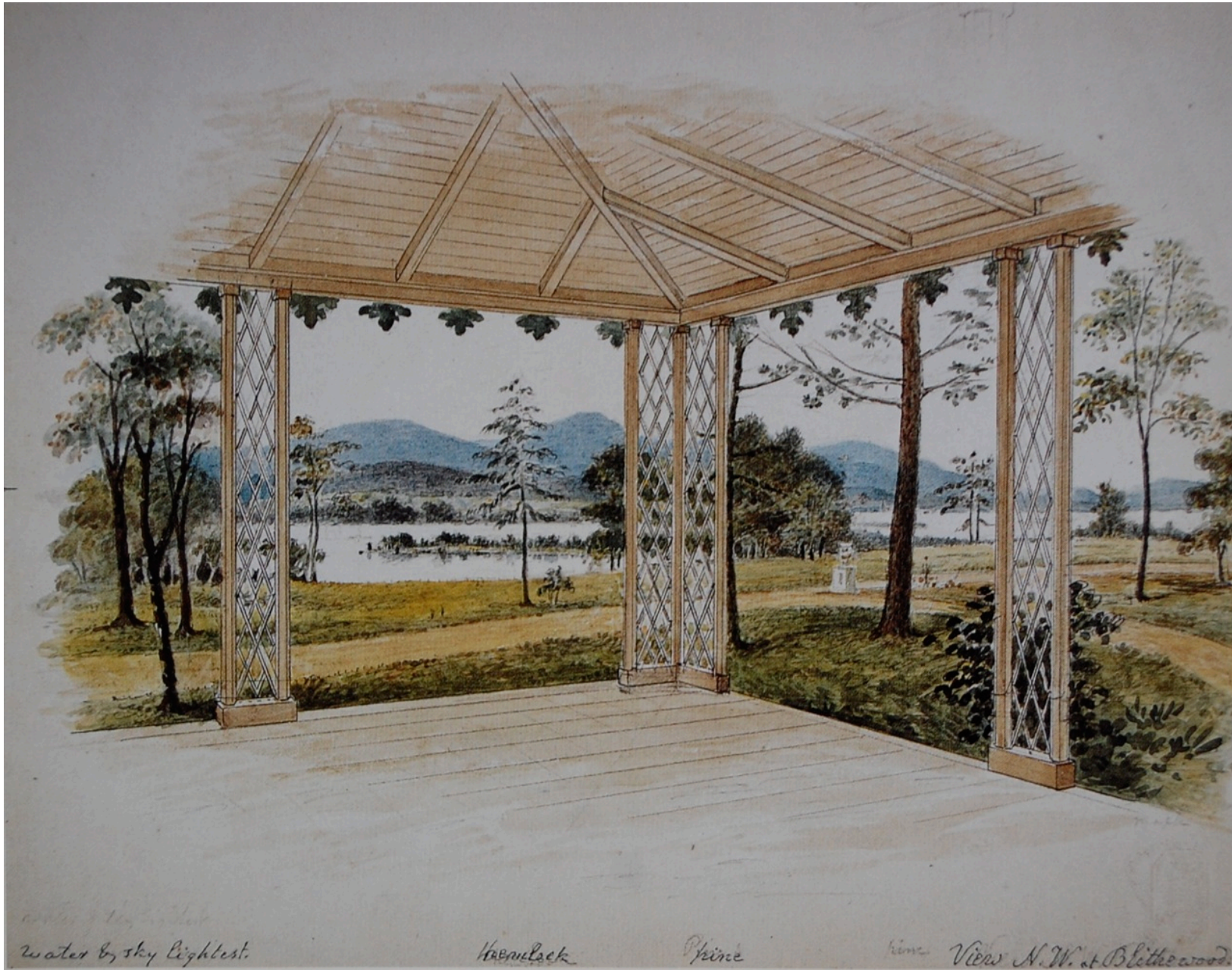
A.J. Davis. Detail of pencil sketch of west elevation of Blithewood (circa 1836?). Avery.

Figure 3.13



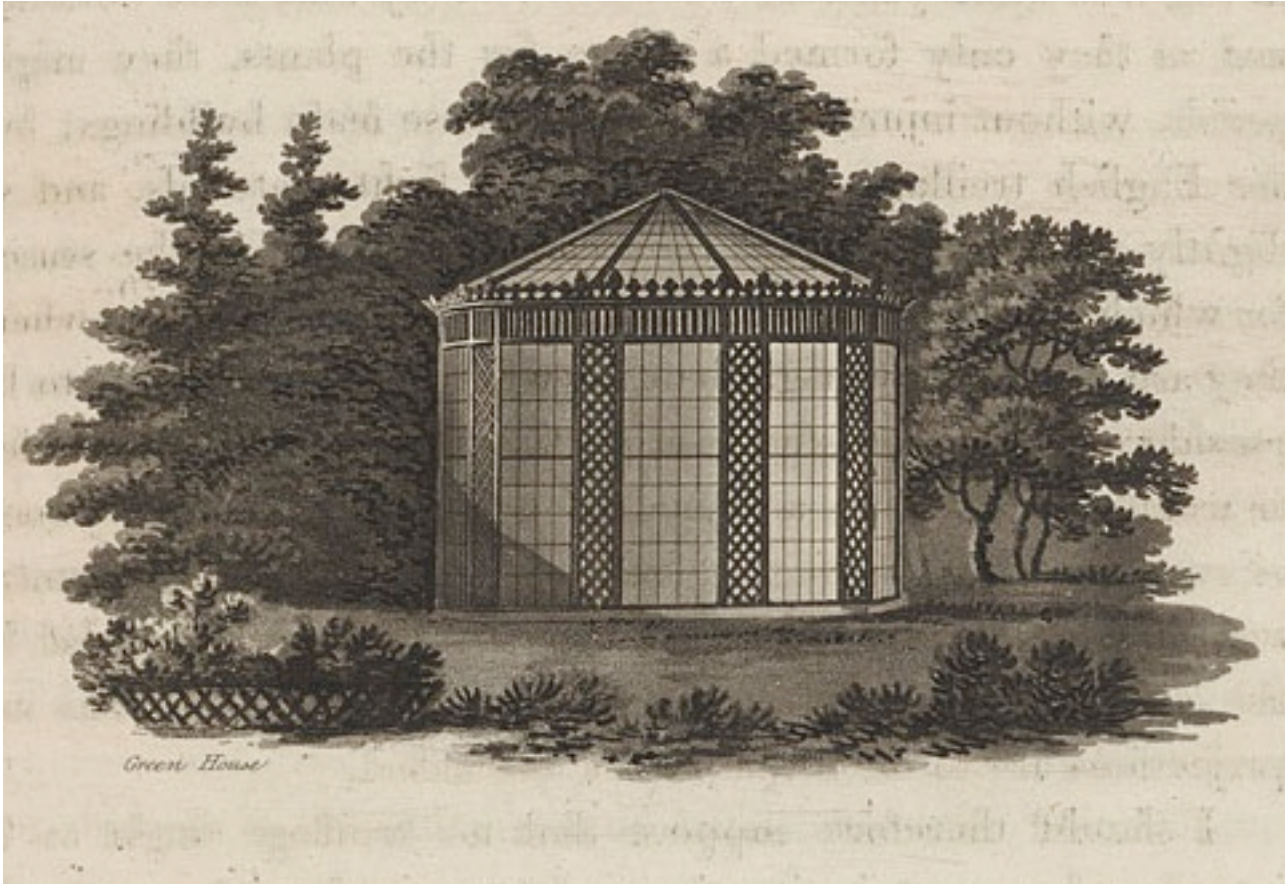
A.J. Davis. Mount Gulian, residence of G.C. Verplanck, Esq., undated. NYPL.

Figure 3.14



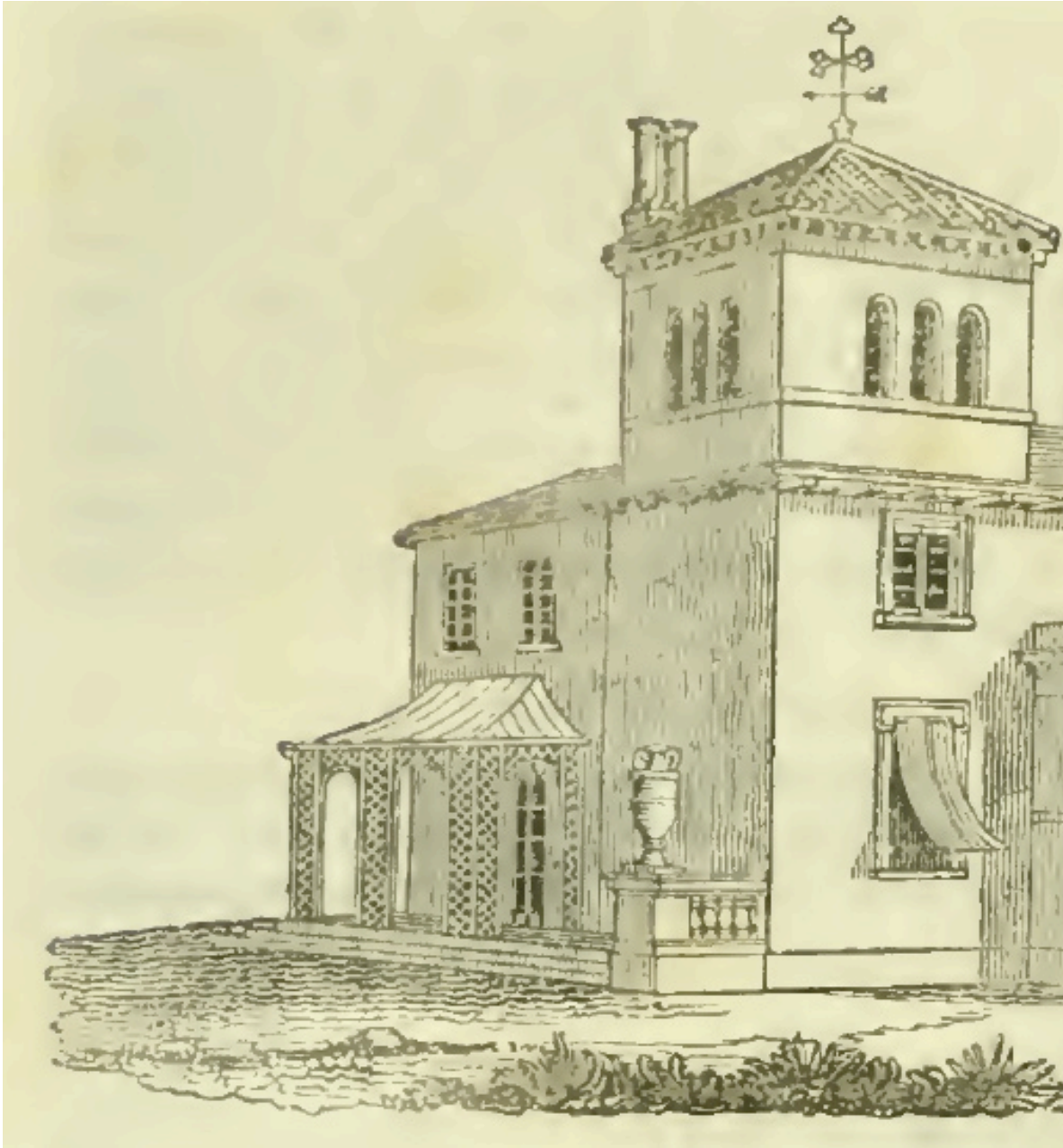
A.J. Davis. View N.W. at Blithewood, circa 1841. Avery.

Figure 3.15



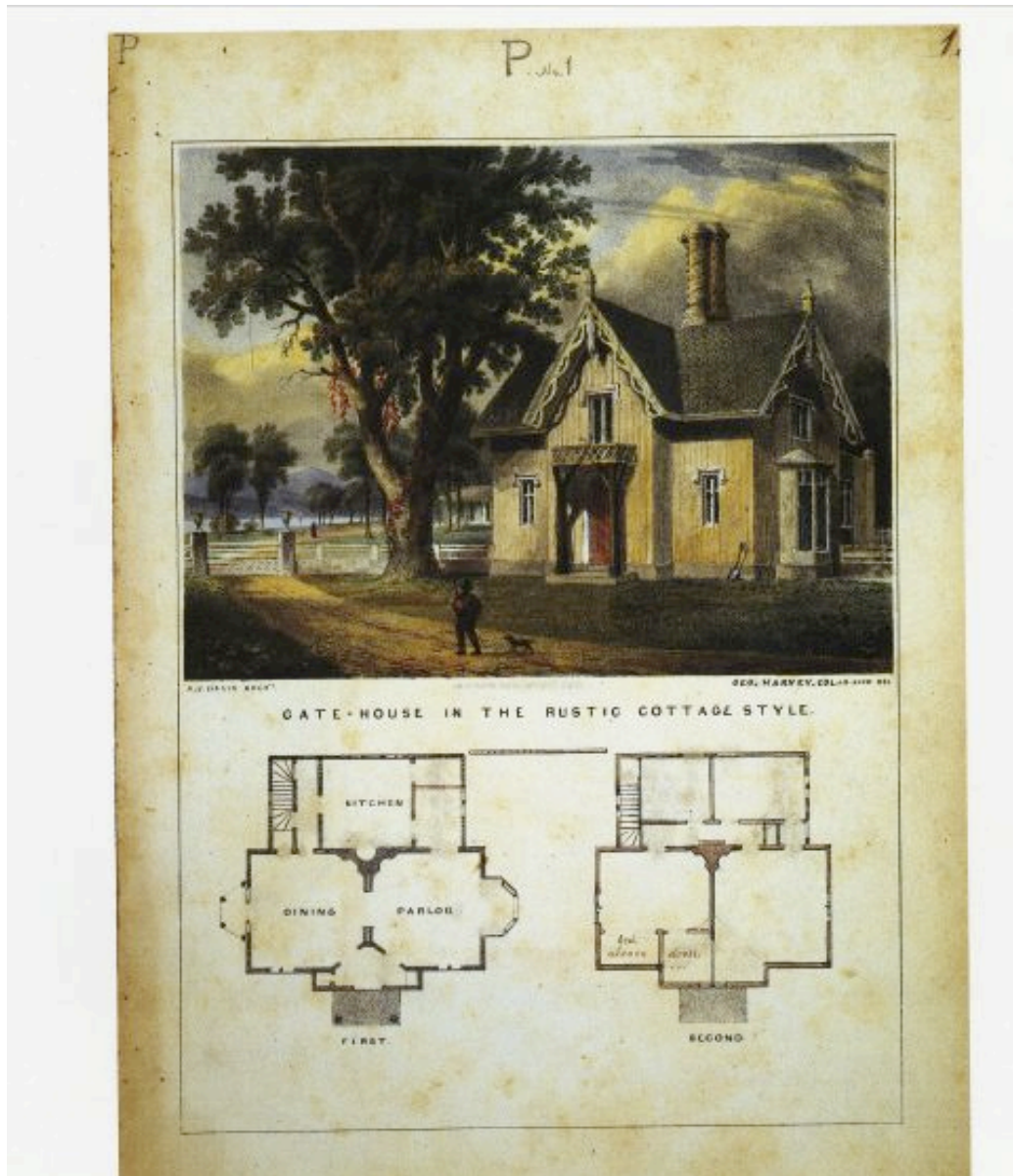
Humphry Repton, engraving from *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1802).

Figure 3.16



J.C Loudon, Plate 1497 from *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture* (1833).

Figure 3.17



A.J. Davis, Gate-House in the Rustic Cottage Style, from *Rural Residences* (1838). Avery.

Figure 3.18

Pl. 8.



*P. F. Robinson del.*

*Engraved by C. Heathcote*

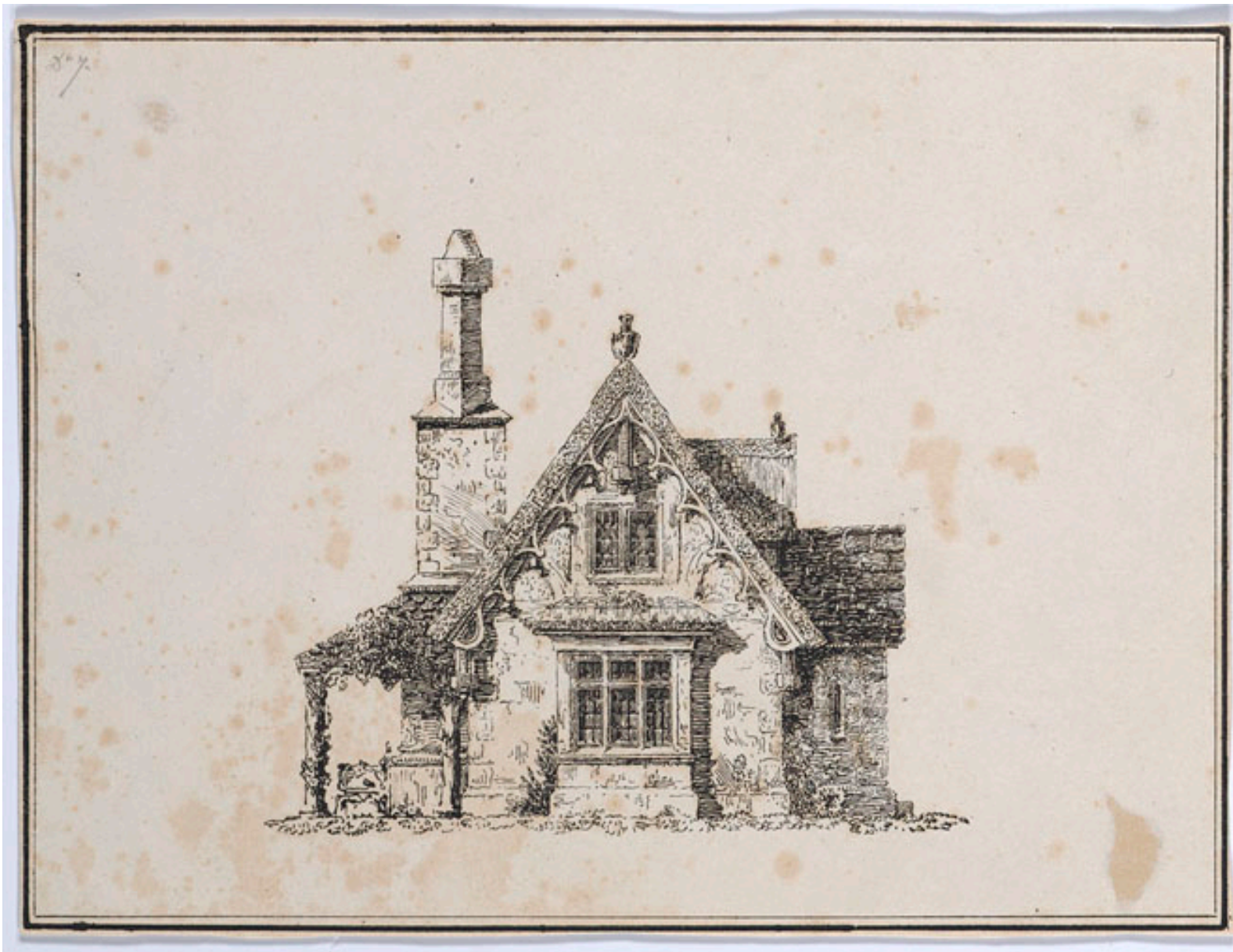
DESIGN NO. 2.

*London, Published by Rudolph F. Martin, 15, St. Paul's Street, Feb. 7, 1822.*

P.F. Robinson. Design No. 2 from Rural Architecture, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (1823).



Figure 3.19



Humphry Repton. Plate from *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Architecture* (1816).

Figure 3.20



Photograph of 1836 gatehouse at Blithewood in role as Gardener's Lodge, circa 1870. Image: Historic Hudson Valley.

Figure 3.21



A.J. Davis. Pencil sketch of gate and entrance lodge at Blithewood, circa 1836. Avery.

Figure 3.22



A.J. Davis. Detail of Gate-House in Rustic Cottage Style from *Rural Residences* (1838). Avery.

Figure 3.23



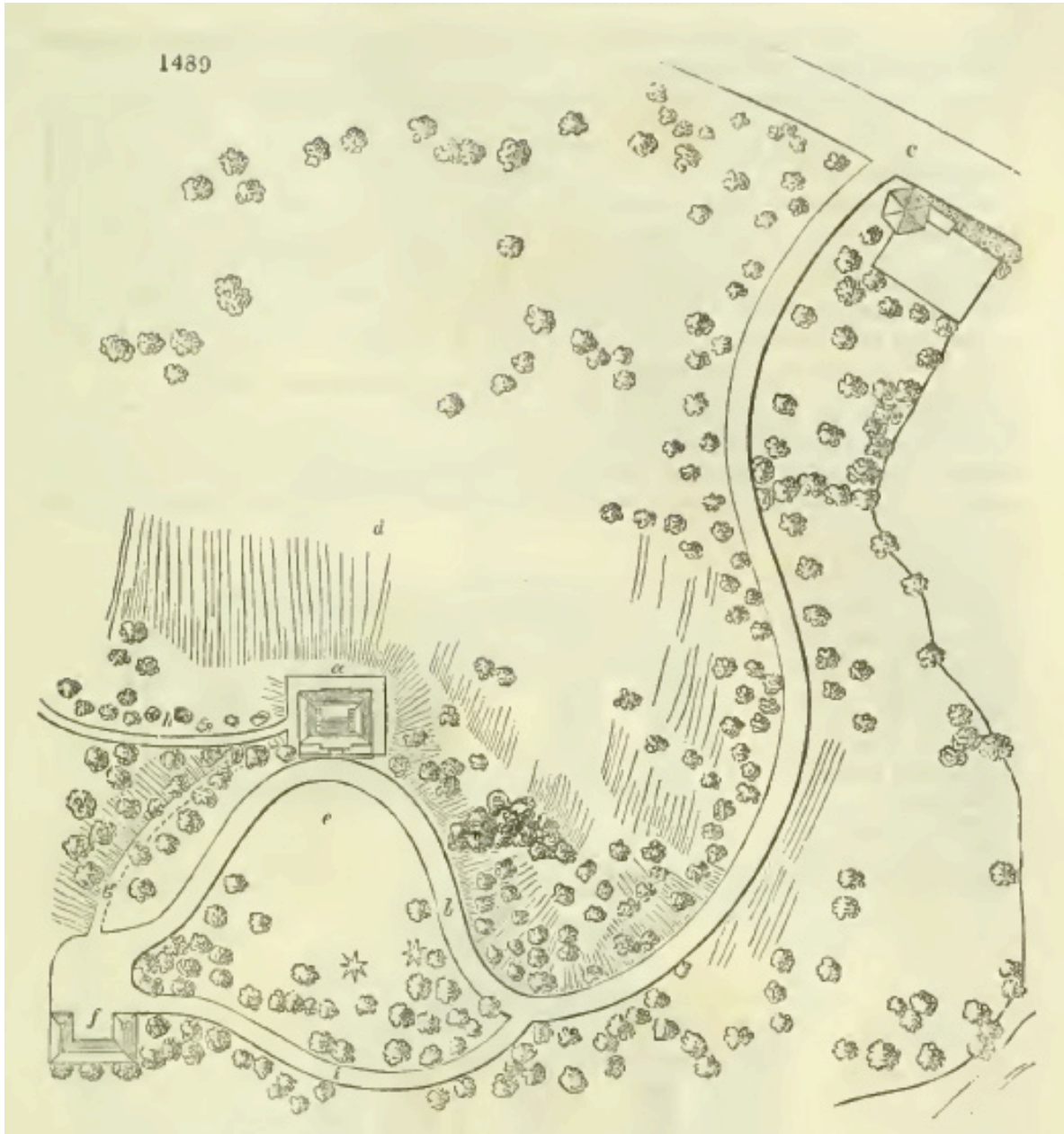
A.J. Davis. Pencil Ground Plan of Blithewood (circa 1841). Avery.

Figure 3.24



New Gate-House at Blithewood. June, 2011. Image: Peter Watson.

Figure 3.25



J.C. Loudon, plate 149 from *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture* (1833).

Figure 3.26



A.J. Davis. Watercolor sketch of entrance to Blithewood, circa 1841. Avery.



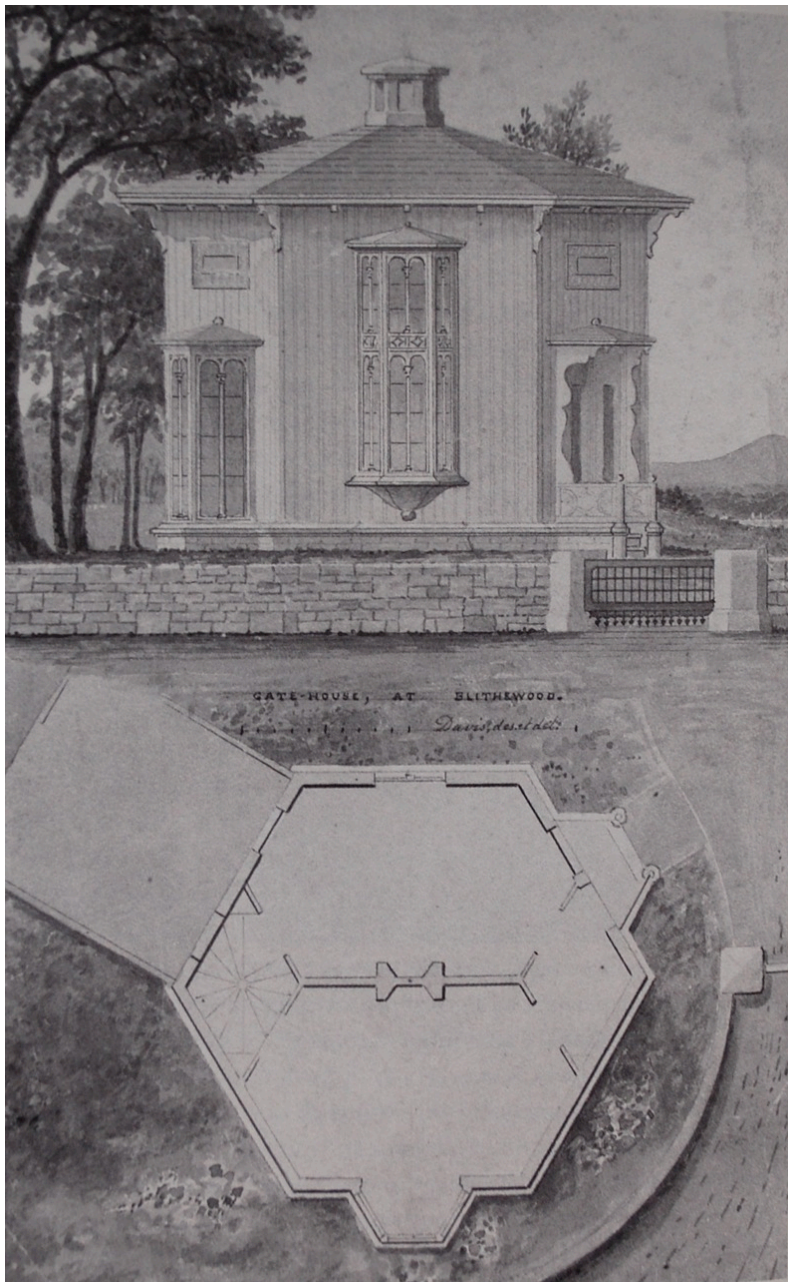
Figure 3.27



[Fig. 62. The New Gate Lodge at Blithewood.]

A.J. Davis. The New Gate Lodge at Blithewood from A.J. Downing *A Treatise of the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (1844).

Figure 3.28



A.J. Davis. Elevation and plan of the new Gate-House at Blithewood, circa 1841. Avery.

Figure 3.29



Aerial view of 1841 gate-house showing cardinal orientation. Google Earth.

Figure 3.30



John Nash. Cronkhill Villa, 2010. Image: Wikipedia Commons.

Figure 3.31



Robert Lugar. Plate V from *Rural Architecture* (1818).

Figure 3.32



A.J. Davis. Detail of pierced brackets, 1841 gate-house. Image: Peter Watson.

Figure 3.33



Detail of 1841 gate-house showing outlines of brackets. Image: Peter Watson.

Figure 3.34

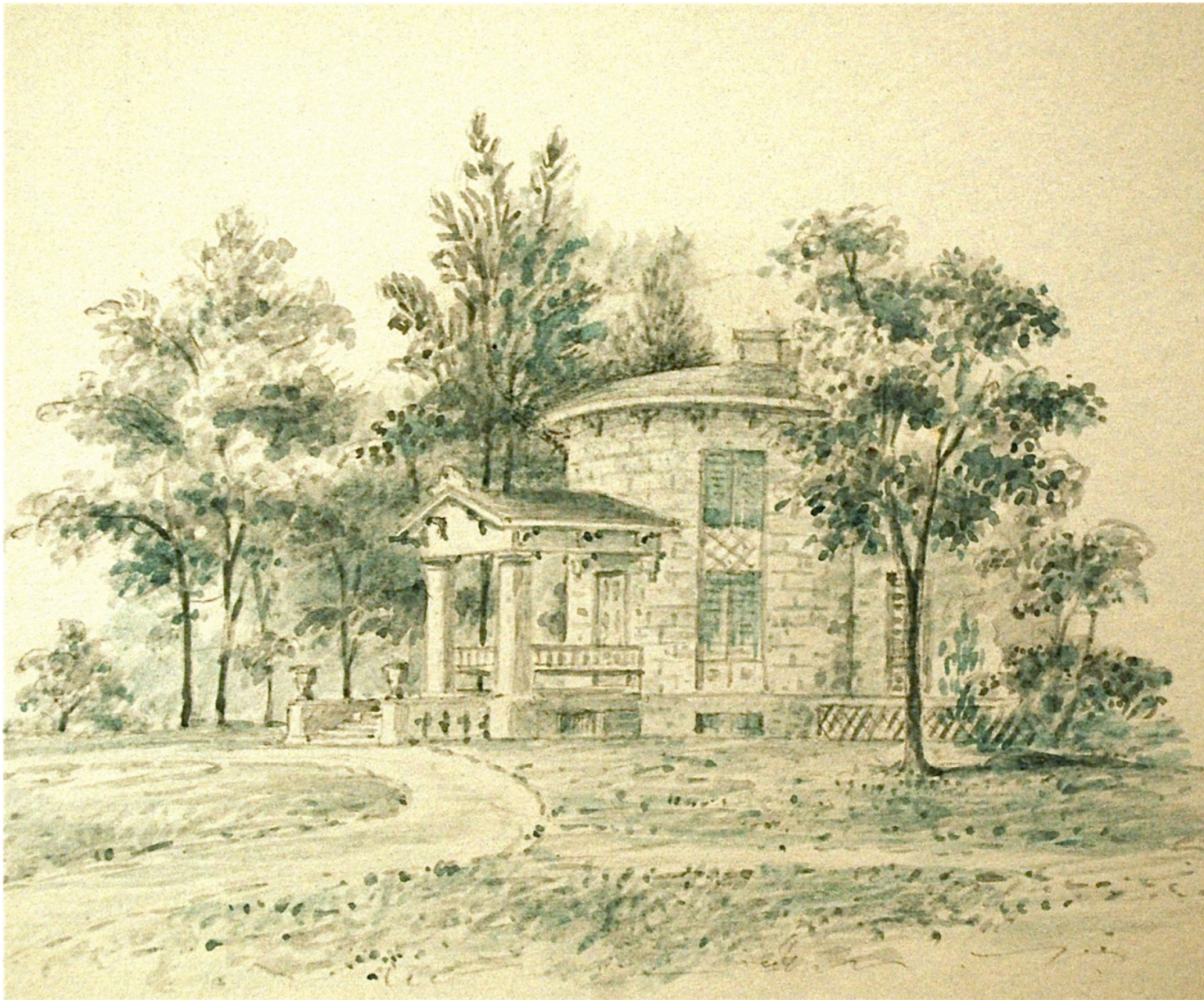


RAVINE WALK, BLITHEWOOD.

A.J. Davis, Ravine Walk.. Blithewood. Avery.

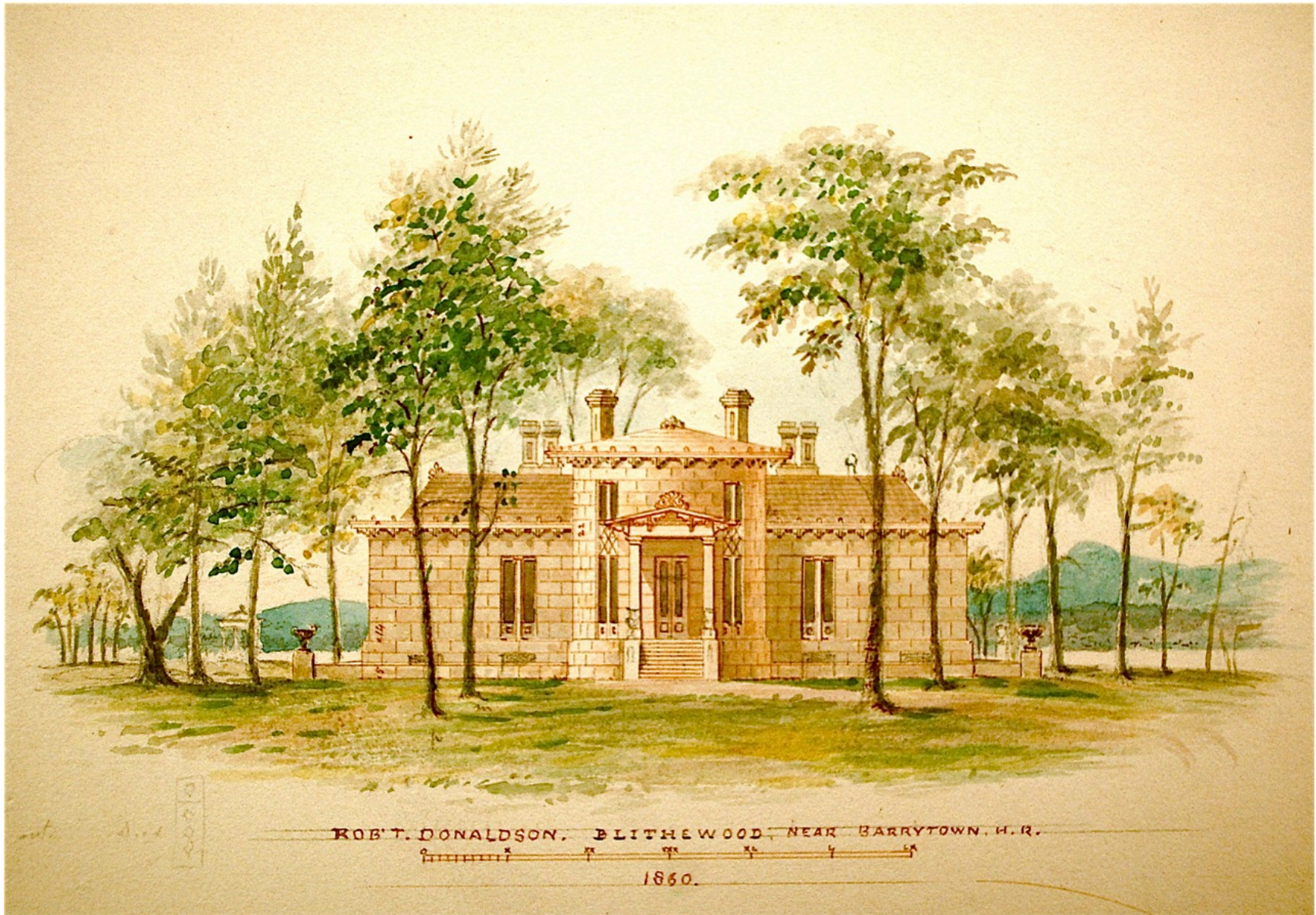


Figure 3.35



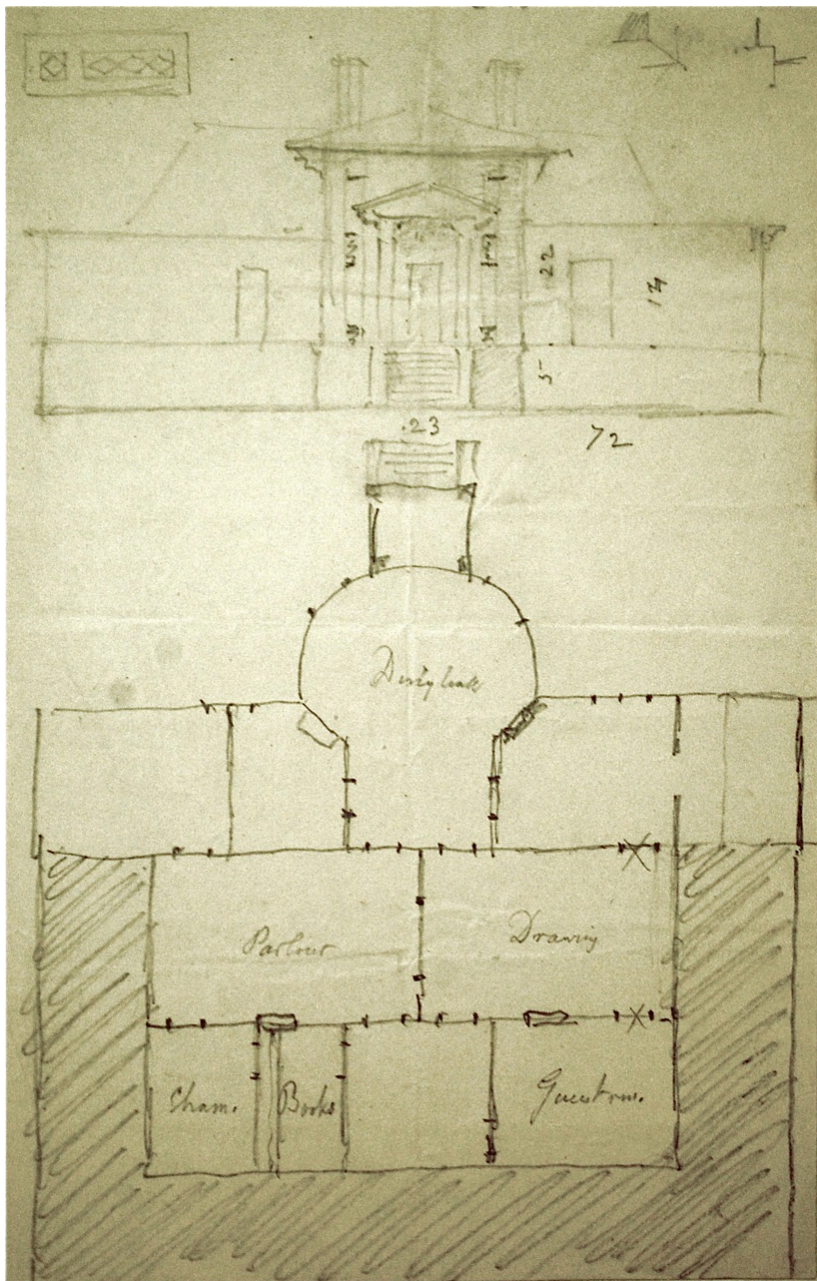
A.J. Davis. Watercolor study for east elevation of Blithewood, circa 1844-45. Avery.

Figure 3.36



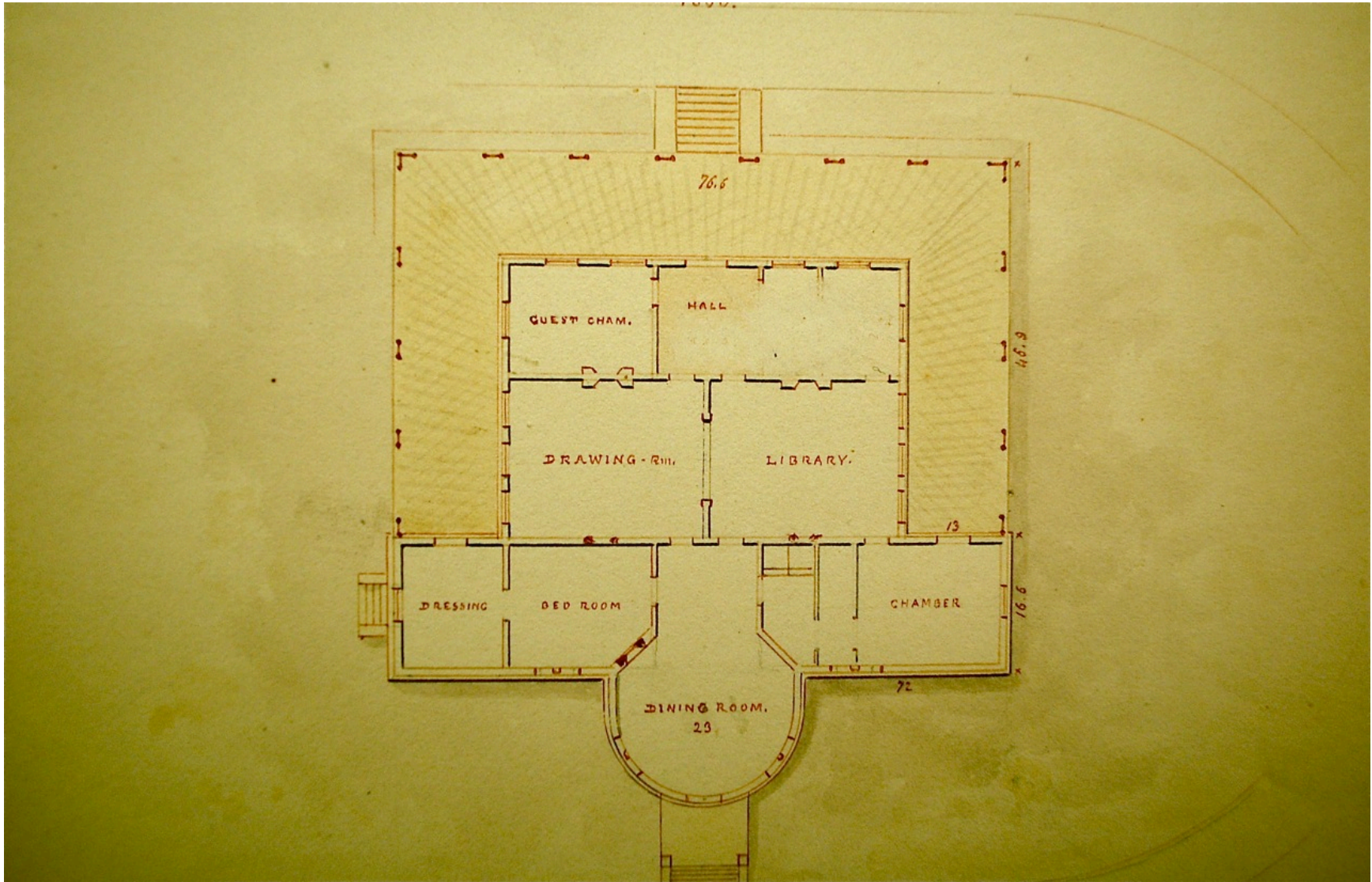
A.J. Davis. Plan and Elevation of Blithewood (detail), dated 1850. Avery.

Figure 3.37



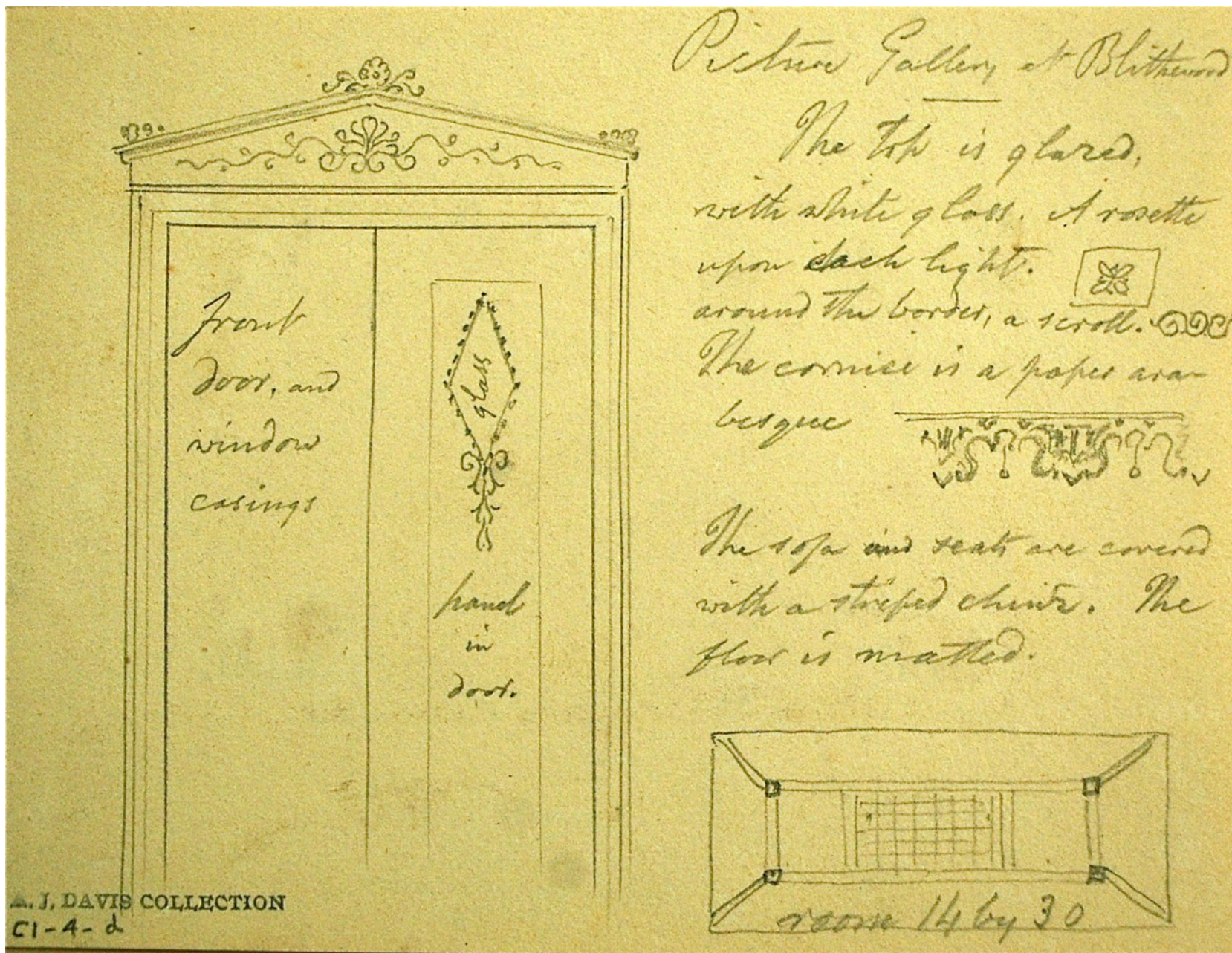
A.J. Davis. Floorplan sketch, circa 1844-45. Avery.

Figure 3.38



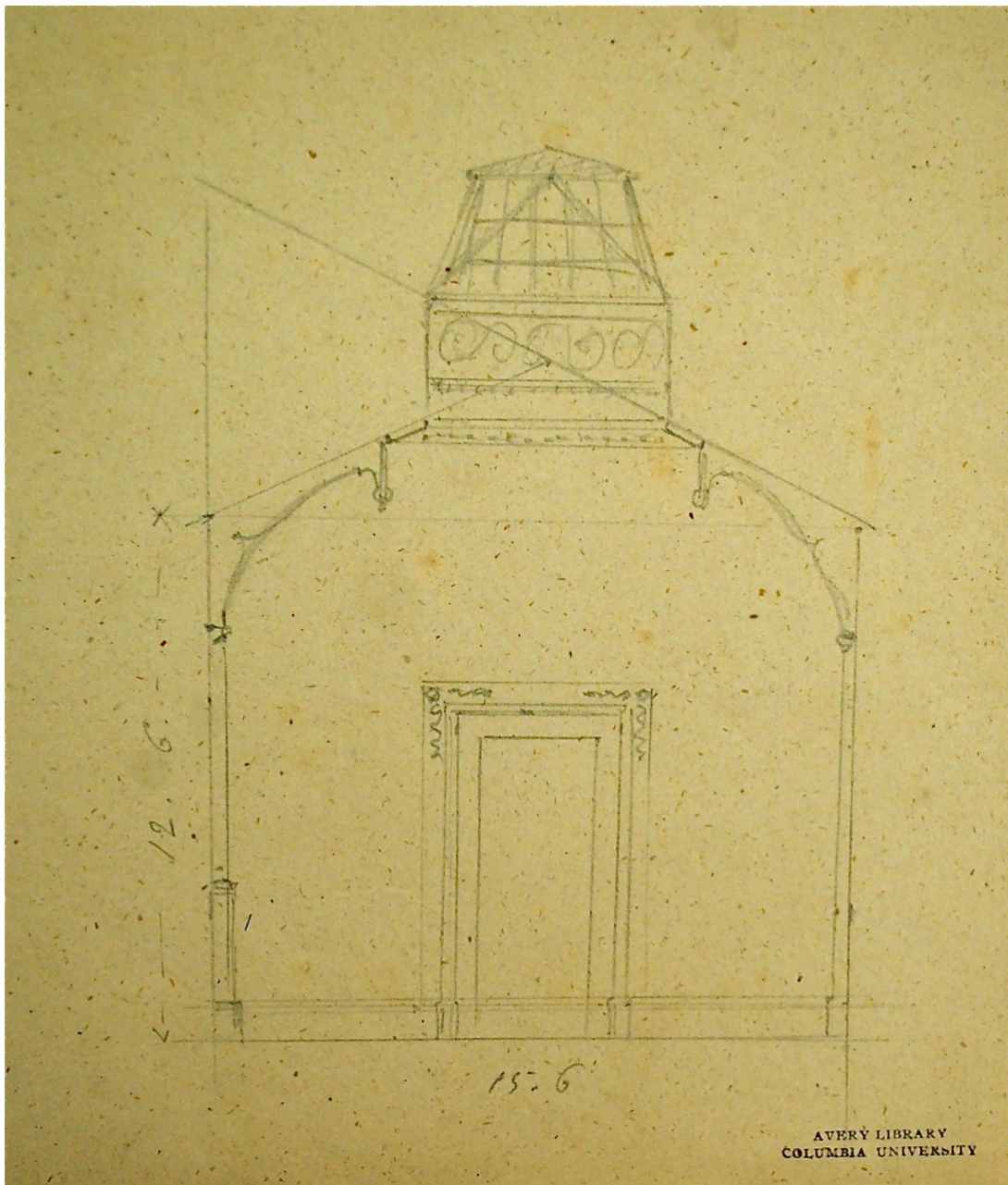
A.J. Davis, Plan and Elevation of Blithewood (detail), dated 1850. Avery.

Figure 3.39



A.J. Davis. Working sketch of specifications for Picture Gallery, circa 1845. Avery.

Figure 3.40



A.J. Davis. Section drawing of Blithewood Picture Gallery, circa 1845. Avery.

Figure 3.41



A.J. Davis. Pencil sketch of Landscape Window in Blithewood Picture Gallery, circa 1845. Avery.

Figure 3.42



Photo of Picture Window at Blithewood, circa 1860s. Courtesy of the Rokeby Collection.

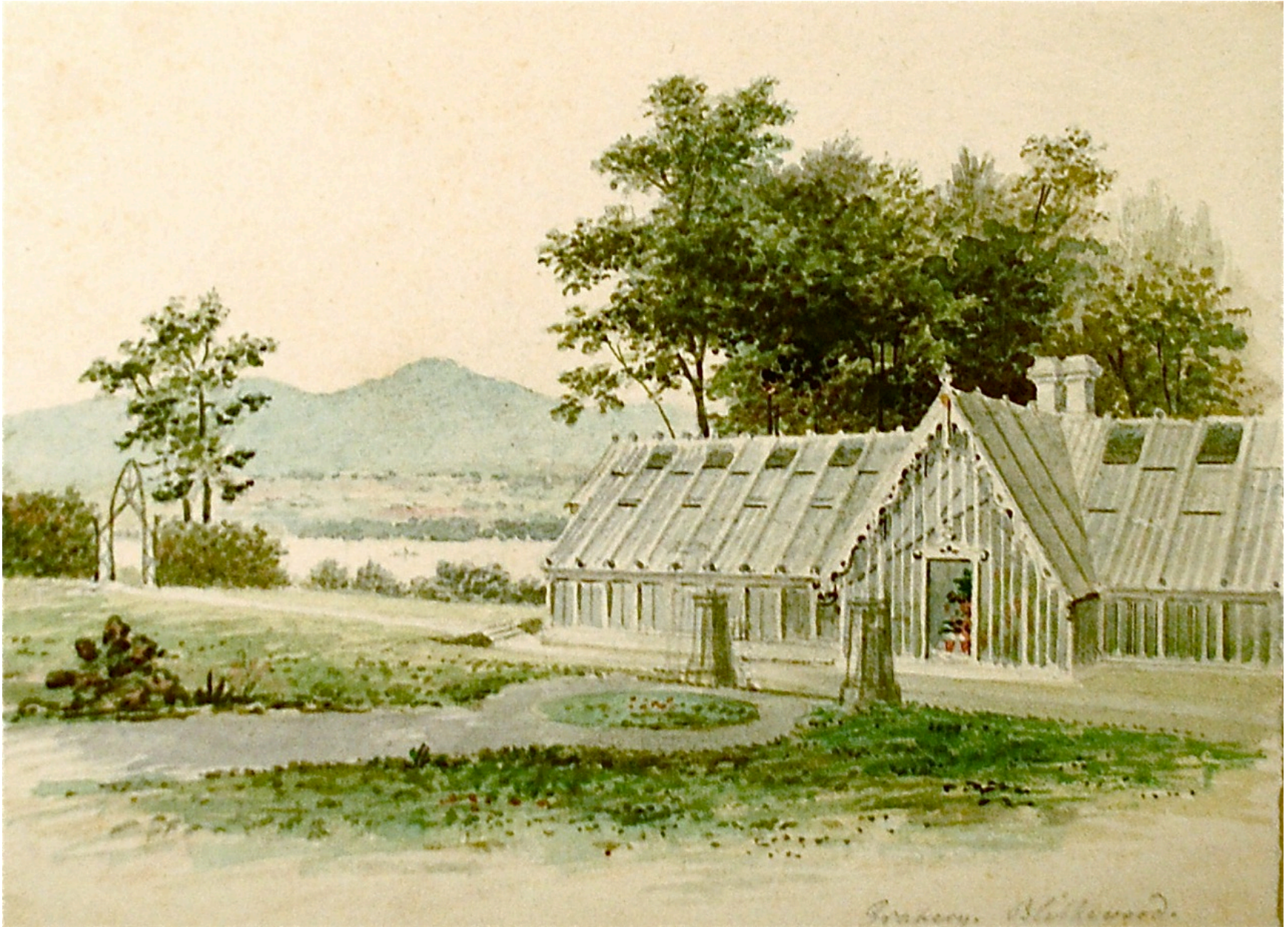


Figure 3.43



A.J. Davis. Pencil sketch of the Spring house, Blithewood, circa 1843. Avery.

Figure 3.44



A.J. Davis. Watercolor sketch of the Grapery, or greenhouse, circa 1845. Avery.

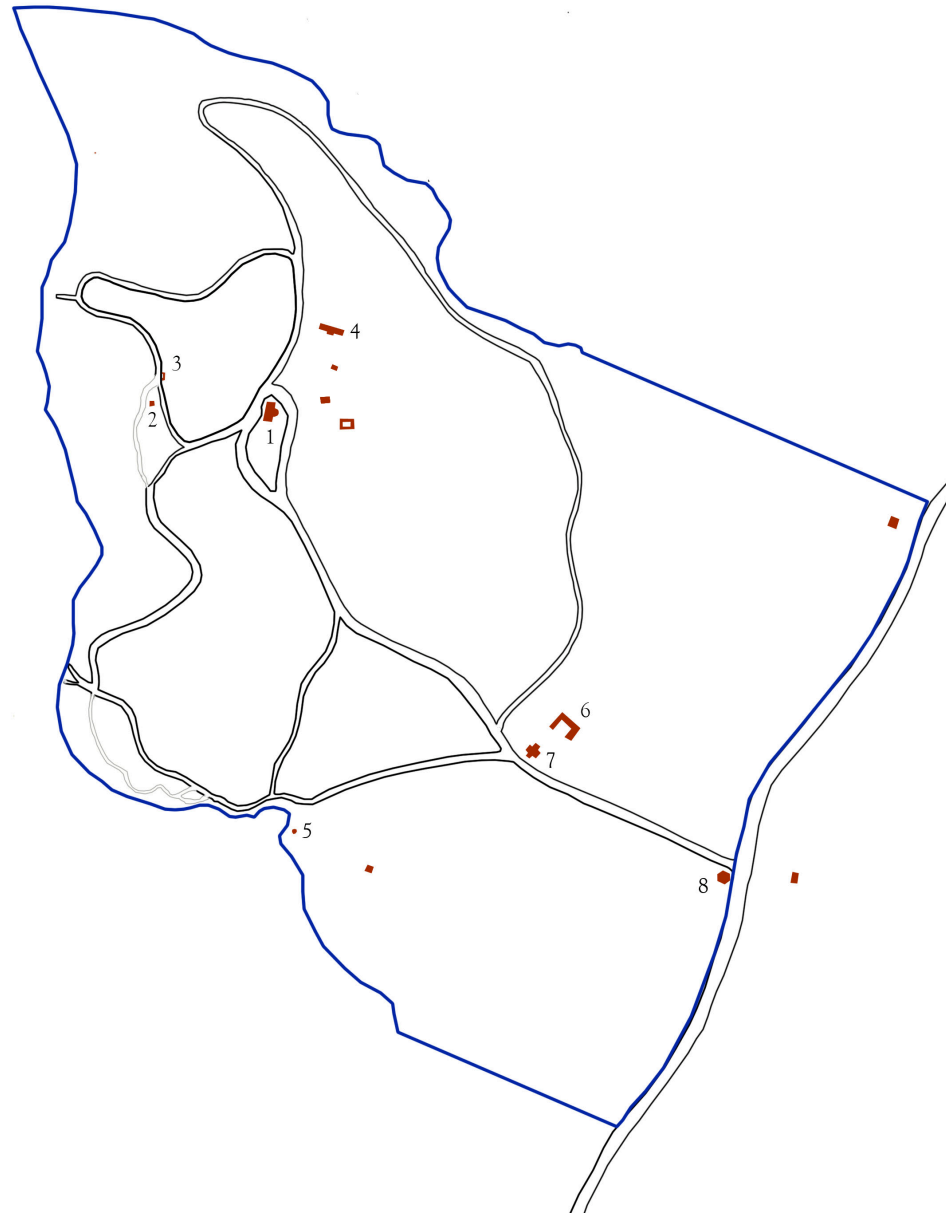
Figure 3.45



A.J. Davis. Watercolor Ground Plan, circa mid 1840s. Avery.

Figure 3.46

1. Main House
2. Spring House
3. Rustic Seat
4. Grapery
5. Rustic Temple
6. Barn
7. 1836 Gatehouse
8. 1841 Gatehouse



Map of paths and structures at Blithewood. Peter Watson.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Picturesque Transformations:**

#### **Dr. Oliver Bronson House (1839-49)**



## Overview

The Dr. Oliver Bronson House is located on the southern edge of the city of Hudson in Columbia County, New York. Samuel Plumb (circa 1760s-1850) built the original Federal style mansion house in 1812 on a two-hundred-and sixty-three acre parcel that also included a working farm and nursery. Dr. Oliver Bronson (1799-1875), and his wife Joanna Donaldson Bronson (1806-1876), purchased the house and eighty-acres of the original land in 1838.<sup>1</sup> A.J. Davis transformed the main house and landscape of the estate in two successive campaigns dating to 1839 and 1849. In 1839, Davis redesigned the primary east elevation of the house (facing the public road), and completely transformed the

---

<sup>1</sup> The property was first subdivided by Robert Frary, who purchased the entire estate from Plumb in 1835 and sold the house and a portion of the acreage to the Bronsons in 1838. According to Robert Toole, Plumb's acreage was sufficient for a viable commercial farm, Bronson's acreage was only appropriate to a gentleman's farm. Bronson later added twenty-nine acres to the south edge of his holdings in 1849. Robert Toole, *Plumb-Bronson House Preliminary Landscape Study* (Saratoga Springs: R.L. Toole, 2000), 12.

landscape design, removing existing outbuildings, adding a new stable complex in a different location, and re-working the approach drive. In 1849, Davis returned to design a large two-story addition with a three-story Italianate tower on the western elevation of the house, effectively re-orienting the house toward the Hudson River. In 1853, the Bronson's sold the house and returned to the family home in Connecticut. During the early twentieth century, the New York Training School for Girls, a Progressive Era women's reform school, purchased the estate. The mansion was used as the superintendent's house and occupied until the early 1970s when the institution closed. Although the facility subsequently reopened as a men's prison, the house was allowed to suffer complete neglect and vandalism over the next thirty years. In 1997, the not-for-profit organization Historic Hudson began advocacy efforts for the house leading to its designation as a National Historic Landmark in 2003. In 2008, Historic Hudson completed the negotiation of a long-term lease to restore and operate the property for public benefit. Surviving features of the original landscape include the main house, the stable complex, portions of the approach drives, original tree plantings from both the Plumb and Bronson occupancies, the remains of a bridge, and several other later cottages.

### **Historical Background**

Oliver Bronson was the eldest son of Isaac Bronson (1760-1838) and Anna Olcott Bronson (1765-1850). He and his seven siblings grew up in circumstances of affluence, dividing their time between the family townhouse at 5 Broadway in New York across from Bowling Green (figure 4.1) and a country retreat called "Greenfield Hill" in Fairfield, Connecticut.<sup>2</sup> Oliver's father, Isaac Bronson, had

---

<sup>2</sup> The Bronson city residence was on the same block at Nathaniel Prime's double townhouse at 1 Broadway; the most fashionable block in the city, directly across from Bowling Green. Greenfield Hill, the Bronson country retreat, had been formerly owned by Timothy Dwight, the President of Yale College. In 1794, Dwight wrote an extended pastoral poem called "Greenfield Hill" which

achieved great success as a financial entrepreneur and banker in the post-Revolutionary War period, propelling his family into the first ranks of wealth in New York City within less than a generation.<sup>3</sup>

Isaac Bronson began his career in medicine, serving in the Revolutionary War as a surgeon's mate (assistant surgeon). During the mid-1780s, Isaac turned away from medicine and began making a name for himself as a merchant and financier. Like many other former military officers, Isaac began trading in the unfunded debt notes issued by the Continental Congress and the states under the Articles of Confederation. Alexander Hamilton's establishment of the United States Treasury system and Bank of United States suddenly made these securities very valuable.<sup>4</sup> Isaac, with his war-time connections to such Connecticut insiders as Oliver Wolcott (the second Assistant Treasury Secretary under Hamilton), was well placed to exploit this opportunity and made his first fortune trading government securities under a brokerage partnership named Isaac Bronson & Co.

By the early 1790s, Isaac had moved his growing family to New York and switched his attention to private banking right before the initial speculative bubble burst. In later years, Isaac participated in the next wave of development of the United States capitalist system, serving as the President of the Bridgeport Bank for three decades (1807-38) and creating the New York Life Insurance &

---

blended moral observations with landscape description; a combination very much in the tradition of such English garden writers as William Mason and Richard Payne Knight.

<sup>3</sup> Background information on Isaac Bronson can be found in Grant Morrison's *Isaac Bronson and the Search for System in American Capitalism, 1789-1838* (New York: Arno Press), 1-58.

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton's efforts to establish the credit of the new nation had a huge impact on the value of the formerly worthless paper. The value of the public debt soared by over 400% between December 1789 and December 1791.



Trust Company (1830) which invested in the development of northern industries, and engaged in land speculation on a vast scale. By the time of his death, Isaac Bronson left an estate estimated in excess of \$2,500,000.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike his younger brothers Arthur Bronson (1801-1844), and Frederic Bronson (1802-1868), who both participated directly in their father's financial enterprises, Oliver Bronson chose to pursue the medical career his father had abandoned. He received his B.A. from Yale in 1818 and graduated from Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1825. His thesis topic at Columbia indicates a speculative frame of mind: "On the Influence of Man's Physical Structure on his Character as an Intelligent Being and Moral Agent."<sup>6</sup> By 1830, he was listed as attending physician at the New-York Dispensary, a charitable institution providing medical services to the urban poor, beginning what became a lifelong involvement with progressive social causes.<sup>7</sup> In 1831, Oliver made his first trip to Europe, studying medicine in Paris. Two years later, in May 1833, Dr. Oliver Bronson married Joanna Donaldson (figure 4.2), sister of Robert Donaldson of Blithewood, at the Murray Street Presbyterian Church.

---

<sup>5</sup> Moses Yale Beach, *Wealth and Biography of the Citizens of New York City*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., (New York: The Sun Office, 1845), 7.

<sup>6</sup> *The New-York Monthly Chronicle of Medicine and Surgery*, Vol. 1, Number 10, 1825, 351.

<sup>7</sup> The New-York Dispensary had been formed in 1790 to minister to the needs of the urban poor. It was later joined by the Northern Dispensary (1827) in Greenwich Village and the Eastern Dispensary (1832) on Essex Street. While today the term "dispensary" is often equated with "pharmacy," during the nineteenth century it denoted an institution that provided access to physicians as well as medicine to the needy. As an attending physician, Dr. Bronson would have seen a large number of patients from the nearby Five Points neighborhood, administering vaccines, prescribing medicines and treatments. The choice of this institution by Bronson as his first employer is highly relevant. It indicates a well-developed social consciousness that would deepen in later years through his philanthropic work.

The Bronsons and the Donaldsons were part of the same elite social circles and Bronson's family home at 5 Broadway was less than a five-minute walk from Donaldson's house at 15 State Street. Oliver Bronson and Robert Donaldson were only a year apart in age. It is not known whether Oliver Bronson initially shared the same passion for architecture and landscape gardening as Donaldson. His father, however, was interested in landscape design, and conducted multiple landscape and architectural improvement campaigns at the family estate in Fairfield, Connecticut.<sup>8</sup> Through his education at Yale, his travels, and his wife Joanna, Oliver would at least have been acquainted with recent trends in the arts including landscape gardening. But a primary conduit for these ideas during the later 1830s would have been his brother-in-law. And Robert Donaldson would have undoubtedly recommended the services of his favorite architect, A.J. Davis, to his sister and younger brother-in-law.

On August 7, 1837, A.J. Davis recorded an initial visit from Dr. Bronson at his office in the city. The timing of this visit is interesting. The date was approximately a year before Oliver Bronson acquired the former Samuel Plumb estate in Hudson and a year after Davis had initiated his picturesque transformation project with the Donaldsons at Blithewood. By this time, it was likely that Oliver and his wife Joanna would have visited the Donaldsons' emerging landscape garden in Red Hook. But what was the project Dr. Bronson had in mind for A.J. Davis? Had he already identified an existing property to transform or was he considering retaining Davis to build a new villa on an undeveloped site? We will probably never know.

---

<sup>8</sup> In 1795, Isaac Bronson is said to have dug up native dogwood trees in the woods of his estate and planted them along the road. These plantings were admired during the Colonial Revival period and a descendant established an annual Dogwood festival in the village of Greenfield Hill in 1936 that is still celebrated today.

Approximately two years later, however, Davis recorded a trip accompanying Dr. Bronson up to Hudson on April 17, 1839 in his Day Book. The following day, he noted that he had “designed various fixtures & embellishments for him.”<sup>9</sup> Back in his office in New York, Davis wrote that on June 4, 1839, he completed “sketches for stables and barn ornament.”<sup>10</sup> His office Journal noted “Refitting house for Dr. Bronson” and “visiting and sketches for trellis and stables” for which he charged \$30 and \$15 respectively.<sup>11</sup>

### **Samuel Plumb’s landscape garden (circa 1812-1820)**

The property that the Bronsons purchased in 1838 had been a showplace when it was completed earlier in the century. Samuel Plumb’s Federal-style frame house and outbuildings were dramatically set on a raised knoll in an open landscape high above the Hudson River with Mount Merino and the Catskill Mountains in the distance.<sup>12</sup> Artist William Guy Wall (1792-1864) recorded this landscape as it

---

<sup>9</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 197.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Davis, office Journal, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Plumb was a wealthy merchant, originally from Barnstable, Massachusetts, who moved to Hudson in the 1790s. Very little about him is known from the historical record beyond the fact that he was one of the proprietors of an early tow boat company and owned a successful dry goods store in Hudson. The sophisticated design of the house and grounds indicates someone with a strong knowledge of English-style landscape gardening. As a merchant, Plumb may have traveled abroad as part of his business. An early-twentieth-century account noted Plumb’s attention to the landscape: “Mr. Samuel Plumb...built the residence now owned by the McIntyre family, and also set out the magnificent Norway Spruce that graces the lawn on the approach to the dwelling.” Mrs. Anna R. Bradbury, *History of the City of Hudson New York with Biographical Sketches of Henry Hudson and Robert Fulton*, (Hudson, NY: Record Printing and Publishing Co., 1908), 179.

was coming to maturity around 1820 (figure 4.3).<sup>13</sup> As Wall's watercolor makes clear, this original Federal-period landscape design was consciously "picturesque" in the middle eighteenth-century English landscape gardening tradition of Capability Brown. The entire 263-acre parcel had been cleared with the exception of small clumps of trees near the house and a handful of individual trees in the fields to provide visual interest and a sense of depth.<sup>14</sup> Fenced agricultural pastures were moved away from the house to the southwest. The sweeping lawns came right up to the house. The mansion was set in a crescent between a pair of ornamental stables linked by fencing.<sup>15</sup> A small copse of trees at the turnoff from the Branch Turnpike Road was being developed to screen the house from the road. Finally, the landscape picture made extensive use of borrowed mountain and river scenery.

But twenty-six years later, both the house and its landscape design seemed dated. New ideas of the picturesque associated with irregularity and intricacy and new Romantic styles of architecture were taking root in the Hudson Valley.

---

<sup>13</sup> William Guy Wall was an Irish-born landscape painter who emigrated to America in 1812. Wall is most famous for his contributions to *Hudson River Portfolio* (1821-25), a landmark publication celebrating the natural beauty of the American landscape. Wall was also a founding member of the National Academy of Design, where he would have known A.J. Davis.

<sup>14</sup> Care should be taken in determining how literally to interpret Wall's watercolor. Although the general features of the landscape appear to be accurate, there are several anomalies. The most prominent is the presence of a hillock to the right of the house (not shown in the painting) which would be in the path of the fencing and right dependency. This could reflect the artist's idealization of the scene or the hillock could reflect a man-made picturesque creation of the Davis era. Another anomaly is the representation of the first floor fenestration (see note 18).

<sup>15</sup> This arrangement of main house and hyphens relates to the Palladian movement in England during the eighteenth century. The distinctive house design may have derived from an English pattern book.

Accordingly, Dr. Bronson decided to retain the services of the premier architect working in New York: an architect who had already created a picturesque transformation of a house for his brother-in-law.

### **The Plumb House**

The Samuel Plumb house was part of a small group of sophisticated neo-Classical designs in the area, including the James Vanderpoel House (figure 4.4).<sup>16</sup> A close-up of the Wall watercolor provides a more details of the original design (figure 4.5). The house stood fully three stories tall, with a gable-roofed attic story framed by concave brackets and tall chimneys. Faintly visible is the presence of a second-floor roof balustrade and projecting single-story window bays.<sup>17</sup> A full-width porch supported by a range of attenuated columns ran across the front of the house. The overall character of the east elevation during the Plumb-era residency can be reconstructed based on Wall's watercolor, historical photos, and measured drawings produced for recent restoration work (figure 4.6).

For Davis, this house, with its complicated massing, and rich ornament presented a difficult redesign challenge. One approach would have been to strip the Federal detailing and replace it with more fashionable Gothic or Italianate

---

<sup>16</sup> William Krattinger notes that there is a strong stylistic similarity between architectural elements such as the staircase and Palladian window in the Plumb and Vanderpoel Houses that suggests the hand of a common designer. Tradition has connected the "master mechanic" Barnabas Waterman (who is documented to have executed a court house design in Hudson) to the Vanderpoel House, and by extension, the Plumb House, but in neither case has written documentation been found to substantiate this linkage. William Krattinger, *Dr. Oliver Bronson Estate and Stables, National Historic Landmark Nomination* (Albany: New York State Office of Parks & Recreation, 1997), 17.

<sup>17</sup> The presence of these features is confirmed by surviving historic photos of the house.

elements. But unlike other architects of the period, Davis never favored such a drastic approach. Instead, in the 1839 “refitting” campaign, Davis pursued an overlay strategy designed to give the house a more intricate, picturesque character. Other than possibly refining the fenestration into a consistent three-bay composition (by removing two of the first floor windows, and re-centering the remaining two), Davis elected to preserve the existing house and its elaborate Adamesque architectural elements intact.<sup>18</sup>

### **Pagoda Roof Trellised Verandah**

Like his design at Blithewood, the focal point at Dr. Bronson’s house was a reworking of an existing porch into a picturesque trellised verandah that mediated the transition between outside and inside and initiated a closer dialogue with the house’s surroundings. At the Bronson house, Davis began by altering the shape of the porch roof, extending the porch roof eaves downward and outward, creating a concave roof profile that was covered in metal sheeting.<sup>19</sup> The result was a pagoda-like form with flaring eaves that is still visible on the east elevation of the house (figure 4.7).

Below the porch roofline, Davis created an openwork trellis design with elaborate carvings. Fragments of these carvings, including an open-work rope pattern and stylized leaf border (figure 4.8), and an elaborate carved bow knot (figure 4.9) have been preserved. These fragments, combined with ghosts marks

---

<sup>18</sup> Wall’s watercolor shows a pair of windows to the left of the door on the first floor and a single window on the right. It is not known whether this was the original configuration (unlikely) or simply represented Wall’s artistic convention in the painting. Whatever the original state, the fenestration appears to have been reworked into a consistent three-bay composition.

<sup>19</sup> Based on Davis’s surviving building specifications from the period, the original roofing would probably have consisted of *terne* (tin and lead coated iron) metal roof pans installed with flat seams.

and mortises holes on the porch and surviving historic photos, allow the overall composition to be re-constructed (figure 4.10). A porch valance, divided into a series of seven rectangular frames ran across the width of the porch, below which were a series of four rectangular trelliswork panels supported by posts on either side. The ropework and leaf border ran between these posts, the carved box knot elements were inserted in frames between each set of posts.

The 1839 Bronson verandah is one of the most elaborate in Davis's portfolio, so it is worth tracing his sources. One possible inspiration for the Bronson verandah was Davis's own unexecuted design for a suburban villa in New Rochelle (Westchester County) for David Codwise (figure 4.11). This design, which Davis had published in *Rural Residences* the year before, also includes an elaborate pagoda roofed verandah complete with an openwork valance.<sup>20</sup> But this design, like many others in Davis's book, was ultimately derived from English picturesque villa book sources. Architectural historian Barksdale Mayard has traced Davis's Codwise villa design to a plate in T.D.W. Dearn's *Sketches in Architecture* (1807)(figure 4.12).<sup>21</sup> The verandah form itself, however, with its

---

<sup>20</sup> The commission was not executed and Codwise does not appear to have paid for the design. Nevertheless, it remained a favorite of Davis's and he continued to use it for square suburban villas throughout his career. Also present in the Codwise design are ornamental foliate form crowns over each of the posts. Davis included this motif in his Blithewood veranda and also on his 1849 west veranda at the Bronson House. This suggests they may have also been present at one time on the Bronson east veranda as well. Further investigation is required here.

<sup>21</sup> While Dearn's design repeats many of the basic elements (the roughly cubic three-bay composition, the pagoda-style verandah roof, the trellised posts, the long parlor windows) of the Codwise design, many of the details are different. Dearn's design features a side hall plan with a single chimney; Davis's design incorporates a center hall plan with a pair of chimneys. Dearn appears to support his verandah roof with very light iron trellis posts on the front of the house and conventional garden trellis panels on the sides. Davis's design is executed in wood are more elaborately detailed with a Greek key classical motif. Finally, there is no record that Davis owned the specific villa book in which the

concave metal roof with widely flaring eaves and delicate trelliswork executed in cast iron was widely popular in Regency England in both country house and urban contexts (figure 4.13).

A more direct source for Davis's new verandah for Bronson was another English book that is documented in Davis's library entitled *Designs for Gates and Rails suitable to Parks, Pleasure Grounds* by Charles Middleton (1818).<sup>22</sup> As the title attests, Middleton's publication was part of the long line of architectural pattern books inspired by and related to the art of landscape gardening. Middleton provided two designs (figures 4.14,4.15) for "trellis work" that, taken in combination, include all of the basic elements of Davis's composition.<sup>23</sup> Even the specific patterns for the ropework and stylized leaf border that Davis used probably came from an English picturesque villa book source. John Claudius Loudon's *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture*, which Davis had owned since 1835, includes patterns for both elements (figure 4.16).<sup>24</sup>

---

plate is included. He did own another volume by Dearn on hollow brick wall building construction. Maynard, 26.

<sup>22</sup> The majority of Davis's architectural library, some of which was destroyed by a fire in his home in 1870, was auctioned off in 1901. This volume is included in the auction listing. *Catalog of the Architectural and Literary Library of Alexander Jackson Davis*, (New York: Bangs & Co, 1901), 22.

<sup>23</sup> While Middleton provides no construction details in his work, most English trelliswork verandahs of the Regency period were made of cast iron. By 1800, what had originally been a painted wood fixture of the landscape garden was transformed into a product of the Industrial Revolution, and was increasingly used in an urban context. Charles Middleton, *Designs for Gates and Rails suitable to Parks, Pleasure Grounds* (London: J. Taylor, 1818), n.p.

<sup>24</sup> Loudon envisioned the carved oak-leaf border as an "apron" for a verandah, executed in cast iron. Loudon, 74. The ropework pattern appears in a section on "ornamental garden structures" toward the end of the book. Loudon, 985.



## **Bracketing and other embellishments**

On the second floor roof, Davis extended the eaves by one-and-half feet, and added decorative brackets with well-carved acorn drops (figure 4.17).<sup>25</sup> The bracket spacing was aligned to match the width of the window casings below. Relative to the brackets on the 1841 gatehouse at Blithewood, the Bronson house brackets are more robust and three-dimensional. Proportionately, however, they are still quite delicate. The overall effect is still primarily to cast shadows rather than provide extensive structural support.

Below the pediment of the attic story, Davis added a carved “egg-and-dart” border (figure 4.18) that wrapped around the entire cornice of the attic dormer. The choice of the egg-and-dart pattern for this architectural element is interesting. Here, Davis uses a classical motif in a picturesque manner. Instead of decorating a frieze or embellishing a molding as it would be customarily used in a Classical composition, the over-scaled egg-and-dart ornament forms a three-dimensionally carved vergeboard, providing an irregular outline to the classical pediment.

Another examples of this blending and layering of forms and styles can be seen on the front door (figure 4.19). Davis applied a pair of round-arch carvings to each of the six original door panels and the two under-panels of the sidelights. But he left the rest of the doorway design intact, in the process creating a new hybrid composition.

The final embellishment to the Bronson house in 1839 was a re-design of the pair of chimneys on either side of the attic story addition. Originally rectangular in section, Davis called for the chimneys flue masonry to be rebuilt in octagonal section above the roof, and then capped with an octagonal brownstone coping.

---

<sup>25</sup> The bracketed eaves of the Bronson house and stable complex, both completed in 1839, are the earliest extant examples of Davis’s bracketed style.

Above the coping of each chimney, Davis added a pair of tall octagonal fire-clay chimney pots (figure 4.20). The redesigned chimneys presented the “irregular sky outline” favored by English picturesque theorists and landscape gardeners such as Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight while the octagonal faceting of the flues enhanced the play of light over the surfaces.

The overall effect of the transformed east façade can be assessed through a CADD reconstruction (figure 4.21). Davis used the roof eave extensions both to create deep picturesque shadows and to give the composition somewhat more horizontal emphasis, bringing the tall-ship-like original design closer to the earth. The valances, vergeboards, and brackets add intricacy and soften the overall composition. Similarly, by adding new elements in a variety of architectural styles (Classical, bracketed), Davis drew attention away from the contrast between old and new elements.

### **Landscape Transformation**

While Davis’s handling of the existing house showed sensitivity, his treatment of the original landscape design was considerably more aggressive. The classical composition of house and outbuildings was completely dismantled, the barns relocated, the fencing taken down, the open landscape selectively filled in, the drives re-aligned. So why did Davis handle the existing landscape design so differently than the existing architecture? The answer lies in Davis’s embrace of landscape gardening theory. The goal of the art according to Thomas Whately, was to express the “character” of the place in a naturalistic way. But the original landscape composition under Plumb, while beautiful, was very artificial and rather static. It was “picturesque” in an old-fashioned way. Clearly, Davis and Bronson wished to express a softer, more intricate, and romantic character that harmonized with nature; a character more like Davis’s recent work at Blithewood for Bronson’s brother-in-law.

Through his overlay strategy, Davis was able to bend the Federal-style house architecture to his purposes and redefine its character to suit his composition. But the stark open landscape and classical grouping of the buildings were completely at odds with the character of the place that Davis and Bronson wished to define, so they needed to be eliminated. This speaks to an essential part of Davis's design philosophy. Architectural style was not primary, composition was. And composition always included both landscape and buildings.

No Davis drawings have survived to document the overall landscape design of 1839. But the bones of the new landscape design can be seen in a recent aerial view of the property (figure 4.22). The house is set in its own park screened from the main road (present day Worth Avenue on the right hand side of the photo) by a large clump of trees which follow the contours of the land. The new stable complex was sited away from the house to the west. Landscape architect Robert Toole has identified the presence of an abandoned drive that probably was part of Davis and Bronson's original approach.<sup>26</sup> Overlaying this information over the GIS image, allows us to reconstruct the potential approach (figure 4.23).<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Toole, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Although the actual original drive route can only be determined with certainty through archaeological analysis, this hypothetical loop structure with its characteristic windings relates well to both the existing sections of the drive (which would likely have been preserved if possible) and the patterns of surviving old/original tree plantings. Also, the new stable complex is documented to the 1839 campaign, so we know the drives and plantings had to have been reworked to accommodate this. Old maps and photos also document a carriage turnaround loop on the lawn terrace west of the house during the later nineteenth century. But these are not visible in Davis's one surviving landscape sketch from 1849, so it likely this was a later post-Bronson-Davis addition.

After turning off the Branch Road Turnpike (present day Worth Avenue), the visitor passed through an open meadow bordered by a broad clump of trees to the right of the drive. After reaching the sharp bend in the drive, the bracketed stable complex (figure 4.24) suddenly came into view with the dramatic backdrop of the river and mountains to the west shown in Wall's watercolor (see figure 4.4). At this point, the house was still screened by individual specimen trees planted on the lawn east of the house and a belt of trees that screened orchards and fields to the southwest of the house (figure 4.25).<sup>28</sup> Continuing on, the visitor was finally rewarded with a carefully composed oblique view of the house (figure 4.26).<sup>29</sup>

Each element of the new approach to the house was drawn from landscape gardening theory. The creation of an irregular plantation of trees that followed the contour of the land and separated pleasure grounds near the house from pastures, the curvilinear drive that revealed distinct views of the pastoral landscape and Catskill mountains beyond, the abrupt picturesque turn of the drive at the new ornamental stable, the withholding of the view of the house until the visitor reached a favorable vantage point, the circular carriage turnaround, all were characteristic picturesque strategies.

---

<sup>28</sup> Some of these trees, including a large Tulip tree, still exist today. In 1839, these plantings near the house would have also included Lombardy Poplar trees added by Samuel Plumb. Toole, annotation to Figure 5.

<sup>29</sup> A secondary loop appears to have existed on the south side of the house, connecting the basement level kitchen with the adjoining kitchen gardens, orchards, and pastures established to the southwest of the house. (The presence of orchards and vegetable gardens southwest of the house is documented in various sources but their exact locations are unknown). Since the arrival was on the north side of the house, the kitchen entrance and other service areas would be out of view.

## Davis as Landscape Architect

One question that naturally arises is how closely was Davis involved with the execution of the landscape plan? At Blithewood, Robert Donaldson took a lead role in both gardening and landscape gardening. While the evidence is scanty, it is likely that Dr. Bronson and his wife were also at least involved in planning gardens and ordering plant material for their estate.<sup>30</sup> All of this was in accordance with the English landscape gardening tradition that specified an active role of owners in shaping their properties. While a ground plan for the site by Davis does not exist in the archives, it may have existed in some form in the past. Or, in the informal working methods of the period, Davis and Bronson may simply have walked and staked out the approach drive and the desired locations for plantings.<sup>31</sup> It is noteworthy that a week before Davis's first visit, Dr. Bronson ordered ninety-three dollars of plant material from Andrew Jackson Downings's nursery in Newburgh.<sup>32</sup> Downing's involvement in the project is suggestive but it should be remembered that in 1839 he was only twenty-four years old and was still largely a nursery operator. While Downing may have offered informal suggestions about plant selection or siting, it is likely that Davis, with Bronson's input, that took the lead role in laying out the grounds. Davis had gained practical landscape experience in the three years he had worked with

---

<sup>30</sup> For example, a receipt in the Bronson archive at the New York Public Library contains an 1845 receipt for various ornamental plants bought from a Mr. Reid and another for 2 bags of guano from John S. Betts. Also, the 1850 census documents that Oliver Bronson had planted 30 acres of rye. But these records only establish that Oliver Bronson purchased gardening supplies not that he was the gardener.

<sup>31</sup> As he had at Blithewood, Davis also probably drew preparatory pencil landscape views of both the Bronson house and stable complex that guided his design and siting decisions.

<sup>32</sup> Krattinger, 18.

Donaldson, and, as his English gardening book purchases for the period show, he was developing a deepening interest in horticulture as well as landscape gardening.<sup>33</sup> During the early 1840s, Davis would go on to execute several projects where he was explicitly hired to lay out grounds and design gardens.<sup>34</sup> But Davis's primary involvement with landscape gardening was not as a horticulturist but rather as a painter of landscape scenes. And the 1839 Bronson design, even accepting some later additions, has all of the hallmarks of his exceptional compositional skills.

### **Landscape views**

On December 9, 1839, Davis recorded that he was drawing a "landscape view" of Dr. O. Bronson's villa, indicating that the first phase of re-design work had been completed. This drawing does not survive but another landscape view that Davis produced on the same day for James A. Hillhouse in New Haven does (figure 4.27). The Greek Revival style house that Davis had designed ten years before is illuminated by sunlight and stands at the end of a grove of oak trees on a gently sloping hillside with hills in the distance.<sup>35</sup> This watercolor "drawing" is

---

<sup>33</sup> In February of 1836, Davis had purchased "a book on planting." In February of 1839, he had purchased "Loudon's Suburban Gardener of Colman," and in October of the same year, he "Bought of Cooley & Bangs....Papworth, Hints on Gardening." Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 176, 196, 204.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Davis's Day Book records that on October 17, 1841, he was engaged in "laying out ground and planning greenhouse" for Mrs James. On May 3, 1843, Davis recorded his completion of a design for "Atharu Gardens Plan and details \$50.00" On Oct 13, 1848, he recorded a design for a "Rustic seat, reservoir and flower garden for R.D [Donaldson]" and on the 15-17<sup>th</sup> of the same month wrote about designs for "various arboretum buildings for Barton." In April of 1849, Davis supervised the ordering, delivery, and planting of a large installation of trees and shrubs at his mother's house, Kiri Cottage, in Newark. Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 225, 243, 369, 380.

<sup>35</sup> This was Davis's first commission as an architect awarded in late 1828. Davis had been introduced to Hillhouse through Ithiel Town. Hillhouse was one of

one of a number of surviving “landscape views” that Davis produced throughout his entire career. These are not merely fancy architectural renderings intended as presentation drawings to clients. In many cases, the house is not even the focus of the composition. Davis’s expressive use of color, light and shadow can only really be understood with reference to the concepts and traditions of English landscape gardening. They are attempts to express the artistic character of the designed landscape and architecture, to create an official “landscape picture.” Like Davis’s Hudson River clients, James A. Hillhouse understood this English tradition well.<sup>36</sup> That Davis produced a landscape view of Dr. Bronson’s house at all indicated that he viewed his initial picturesque transformation work as a success relative to the lofty artistic standards of landscape gardening.

### **The 1849 Redesign Campaign**

On September 26, 1849, A.J. Davis returned to Hudson to discuss an expansion of the Bronson home. While on this visit, Davis noted that he “walked round with Mr. Donaldson (Robert’s brother James) and also rode to Mt. Merino and ascent [Sic] through the fields and woods.” After this ride, he “arranged plan with Dr. Bronson for addition to his house.”<sup>37</sup> This typically terse series of notations is instructive. The Bronsons desired a new addition to their house which logically would be on the river side (west elevation) since Davis had already redesigned the other house front ten years before. Davis, in his characteristic way wanted to

---

several gentleman patrons of the arts who opened up his library to the ambitious young artist and architectural draughtsman and served as an important mentor to Davis during his early career.

<sup>36</sup> Following the death of his father, Hillhouse had written a landscape poem called Sachem’s Wood (the name of the estate) that was fully in the tradition of English landscape gardeners/poets that stretched back to Alexander Pope.

<sup>37</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 390.

explore the pictorial possibilities of the new addition, so he walked and rode all over the property and surrounding viewshed, returning to the house from the fields and woods below (closer to the river). Only then was he prepared to discuss the plan of the new addition.

The essence of Davis's new design for the west elevation of the Bronson house is conveyed in a tiny pencil landscape sketch (figure 4.28) executed in Davis's quick but precise hand. The focus is a square, three-story, Italianate tower that projects slightly from the main body of a two-story addition and commands an extensive view over the Hudson River and Catskill mountains beyond. Davis uses the topography of the site to maximum effect, taking advantage of the slope of the land away from the house to enhance the perceived height of the prospect tower.

Davis's first use of an Italianate villa tower addition to an existing house was probably at Blithewood in 1842. This example featured a rather squat two-story round tower that may have been influenced by Nash's Cronkhill. Three years later, Davis designed a square Italianate tower addition (figure 4.29) to transform an existing federal farmhouse for Governor John Motley Morehead's Blandwood in Greensboro, North Carolina. But neither of these examples is as well integrated with the original house as Davis's new design for Dr. Bronson and his wife.

### **Floorplan Transformation**

Davis's design intent for the 1849 addition can be best understood through a comparison of the original and expanded floor plans (figure 4.30). The original 1812 house featured a conventional double-pile, center hall design that had been embellished with a pair of semi-octagonal bays that projected five-feet-eight inches beyond the walls of the main body of the house. In his redesign, Davis "mirrored" the original ground floor plan, creating an addition with a pair of new rooms with semi-octagonal bays that matched the original Federal front



parlors. Between these two new rooms, Davis placed an octagonal gallery that was enclosed within the square base of the tower.<sup>38</sup> Completing this mirroring strategy, Davis added a full width single-story ornamental verandah with a pagoda-form metal roof across the west elevation to balance his ornamental verandah on the east elevation.

### **West Verandah**

The new verandah design both repeated and varied the formula of Davis's earlier verandahs. The 1849 composition still involved diagonal trelliswork posts and an openwork apron set below a flared-eave metal roof. But rather than a ropework pattern, Davis used Norman arcading with acorn drops (figure 4.31) and hung the apron in front of (rather than flush with) the trellised posts (figure 4.32). For the posts, Davis substituted a Chinoiserie-inspired diagonal block pattern that also may have been derived from a design in Middleton (figure 4.33).

Overall, the design is bolder and more rhythmic. As can be seen in a photo from circa 1890 (figure 4.34), Davis sets up sophisticated interplay between the relatively flat segmental arches of the doorway and window architraves and the rounded arches of the apron and sculptural niches he added on either side of the door. This play of curves contrasts with strong diagonals of the posts.

---

<sup>38</sup> The measurements indicated that the new three-bay addition was planned as a series of eighteen-foot squares.

## Transformation of Space and Circulation

Davis's spatial planning for the new 1849 Bronson addition shows considerable evolution over his work at Blithewood.<sup>39</sup> The new Bronson addition created an entirely new house plan that balanced the new and old houses. A pivotal feature of the new design was the octagonal gallery in the base of the tower. In the original Federal period plan, the center hall allowed air and light to flow through the house when the doors were both opened up in the summer months. Davis retained this design, providing circulation out to the new porch through the original back door opening. A visitor standing on either verandah could still look through the house and see a glimpse of nature on the other side (see figure 4.34).

In addition to preserving the east-west flow, Davis used the octagonal gallery to create an entirely new north-south axis of circulation between the new parlors, each of which could be closed off from the gallery using pocket doors. This created flexible entertaining spaces that could be opened up to make the house seem dramatically larger (figure 4.35). The octagonal gallery reflects Davis's maturation as a country house architect during the 1840s. He appears to have first used this form several years before at the Harrall mansion in Bridgeport (figure 4.36) where an octagonal entry hall connects a pair of parlors with semi-octagonal ends and links back to a center hall.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> At Blithewood, the new picture gallery (1845) was somewhat awkwardly carved out of the center hall and the new round tower (1842) tentatively introduced into the rectangular plan of the house.

<sup>40</sup> This sophisticated form may ultimately have derived from a yet unidentified English picturesque villa book. Picturesque architect John Nash used octagonal galleries at both Luscombe Castle (his own house) and more famously at the Royal Pavilion at Brighton; a work both Davis and Dr. Bronson would have been familiar with.

The second floor of the 1849 Bronson tower addition housed a square sitting room that opened on to a pair of large and elegantly finished bedrooms with extensive views of the Hudson River. Lastly, the tower's third floor was occupied by a high-ceilinged square "prospect room" offering extensive vistas in three directions.

### **Geometry, Variety, and the Picturesque**

At first glance, Davis's 1849 redesign of the Bronson house might seem a departure from his earlier work, infusing a more analytically-driven design approach for his earlier pictorial mode of composition. The new composition centers the tower on the evenly divided new façade, and the new wings balance the symmetry of the original house. But in reality, this seeming regularity is deceiving and serves as a foil for Davis' varied play of forms. For example, although the new house front presents a regular three-bay composition, the first-floor windows are round rather than square-headed and contain internal rather than external Venetian blinds (see figure 4.32). And while each face of the third story prospect tower contains what appears to be a tripartite window, the western face originally contained a blind jalousie between two tall windows, and the two other exposed faces contained a single window between two blind jalousies. These blind openings have now been covered over with shingles which somewhat obscures the original design intent (figure 4.37).<sup>41</sup> But one of the original jalousies survives on the south side of the new addition (figure 4.38) Finally, Davis repeats the same bracketed eaves of his 1839 design at the second and third floor levels of the addition but spaces the brackets much closer together creating a different effect (figure 4.39).

---

<sup>41</sup> The physical evidence of these original tower jalousies was noted in a recent survey by Mesick Cohen Wilson Baker Architects. *Dr Oliver Bronson House Conservation & Stabilization Report* (Albany MCWB architects, 2011), 4.

In additions to these infusions of picturesque variety into an otherwise symmetrical design, Davis also introduces a degree of subtle asymmetry into his composition that has a picturesque motivation. On both semi-octagonal ends of the two-story addition, Davis added a secondary one-story semi-octagonal bay (figures 4.40, 4.41).<sup>42</sup> The presence of these bays and their differing sizes is explained by how the building was meant to be seen. The primary weakness of Davis's two-front house designs (like Blithewood) is the side elevations. Following English landscape gardening practice, Davis typically "planted out" these elevations with trees and shrubberies in his drawings and advised his clients to do the same. But as his landscape sketch indicates, the Bronson house was (and still is) open to the southwest, offering a clear view of the side elevation from the lawns to the south and west of the house. The secondary bays were intended to add three-dimensional interest to the exposed side elevations and provide a stepped visual transition between the tower, the two-story addition and the original federal projecting bays. The bays differing sizes are explained by the relationship of the rooms to their prospects. As can be just glimpsed in Davis's sketch, the edge of smaller one-story bay (left side of figure 30) stood in close proximity to a grouping of tall trees. This shallow bay was intended to provide the same sense it does today of standing directly in the greenery in a pool of light (figure 42). The larger bay on the other side of the house (right side of figure 30), on the other hand, offered an open southwest prospect over expansive lawns and the Hudson River and Catskill mountains beyond. This one story bay was scaled more generously to balance its relationship to this open landscape and exposed mass of the main house.

---

<sup>42</sup> These secondary bays do not appear on either his office book sketch (figure 33) or another surviving drawing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But they are recorded in a tiny floorplan sketch in his Day Book indicating they were always part of his original design intent at the Bronson house.

## Conclusions

The two redesign campaigns at the Dr. Oliver Bronson house bracket the most productive periods of A.J. Davis's career. The 1839 project was undertaken when Davis was just completing his initial picturesque transformation at Blithewood. He employed the same working methods he had developed in the early years of his collaboration with Donaldson, "walking round and studying" the property to understand its possibilities. And the overall focus of his house re-design strategy was similar: an English picturesque-style verandah with trellised posts was overlaid over the original house design and the eaves were extended and bracketed to enhance the play of light and shadow. In keeping with the more elaborate style of the original Plumb house design, Davis also added similar picturesque overlays to the attic dormer pediments, the chimneys, and even the front door. This relatively sensitive house transformation was accompanied by a more aggressive reworking of the surrounding landscape that related to an earlier version of English landscape gardening. Here Davis and Bronson substituted the "abrupt windings," romantic outbuildings, and sudden surprises favored by later generations of English landscape gardeners and theorists of the picturesque.

When Davis returned to the Bronson estate in 1849, he brought with him ten years of experience as the leading country house architect in America that had been fueled by his productive collaboration with Andrew Jackson Downing who has matured into an important force in landscape and architectural design. Davis's 1849 Bronson house redesign campaign shows him working at his best, using his deep understanding of the picturesque both as a style and as a mode of composition to create a sophisticated and entirely new design in harmony with its site. Davis's take on the English picturesque was less literal and more nuanced. His command of forms is stronger and he shows equal attention to interior and exterior planning, to "aspects" as well as "prospects."

Figure 4.1



Broadway from the Bowling Green (Bronson house is third from left) , engraved by William James Bennett, from Megarey's *Street Views of the City of New York* (circa 1834). Source: NYPL.

Figure 4.2



Portrait of Joanna Donaldson by Charles R. Leslie, circa 1820. Collection of Richard Hampton Jenrette.

Figure 4.3



William Guy Wall. View Near Hudson looking southwest toward Mount Merino, circa 1820. N-YHS.

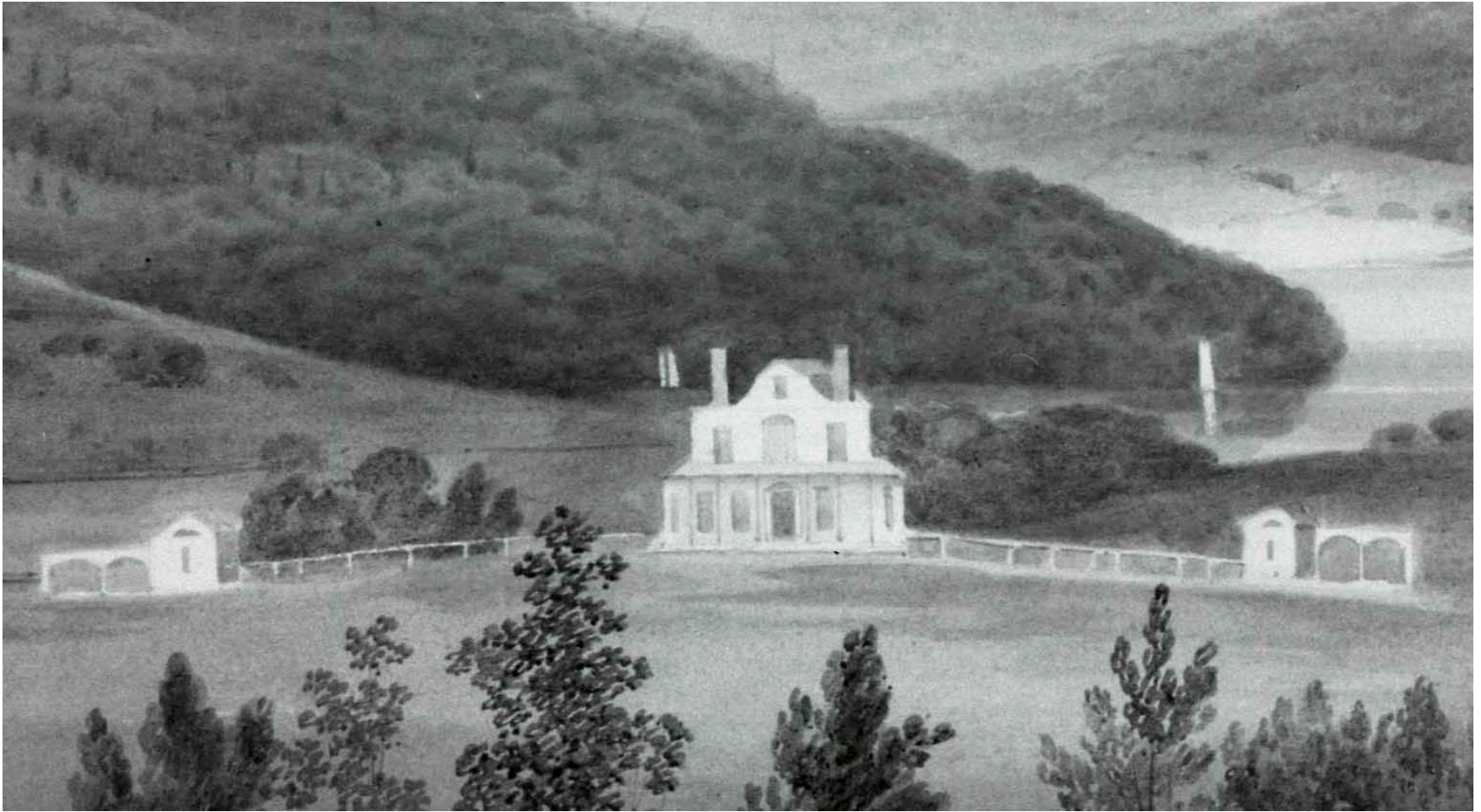


Figure 4.4



James Vanderpoel House, Kinderhook, New York, circa 1818. Image: Peter Watson.

Figure 4.5



William Guy Wall. View Near Hudson looking southwest toward Mount Merino (Detail). N-YHS.

Figure 4.6



CADD reconstruction of circa 1812 appearance of east elevation of Samuel Plumb House. Peter Watson.

.Figure 4.7



Detail of east verandah roof. Dr. Oliver Bronson House, Hudson, NY. Photo taken July 2011. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.8



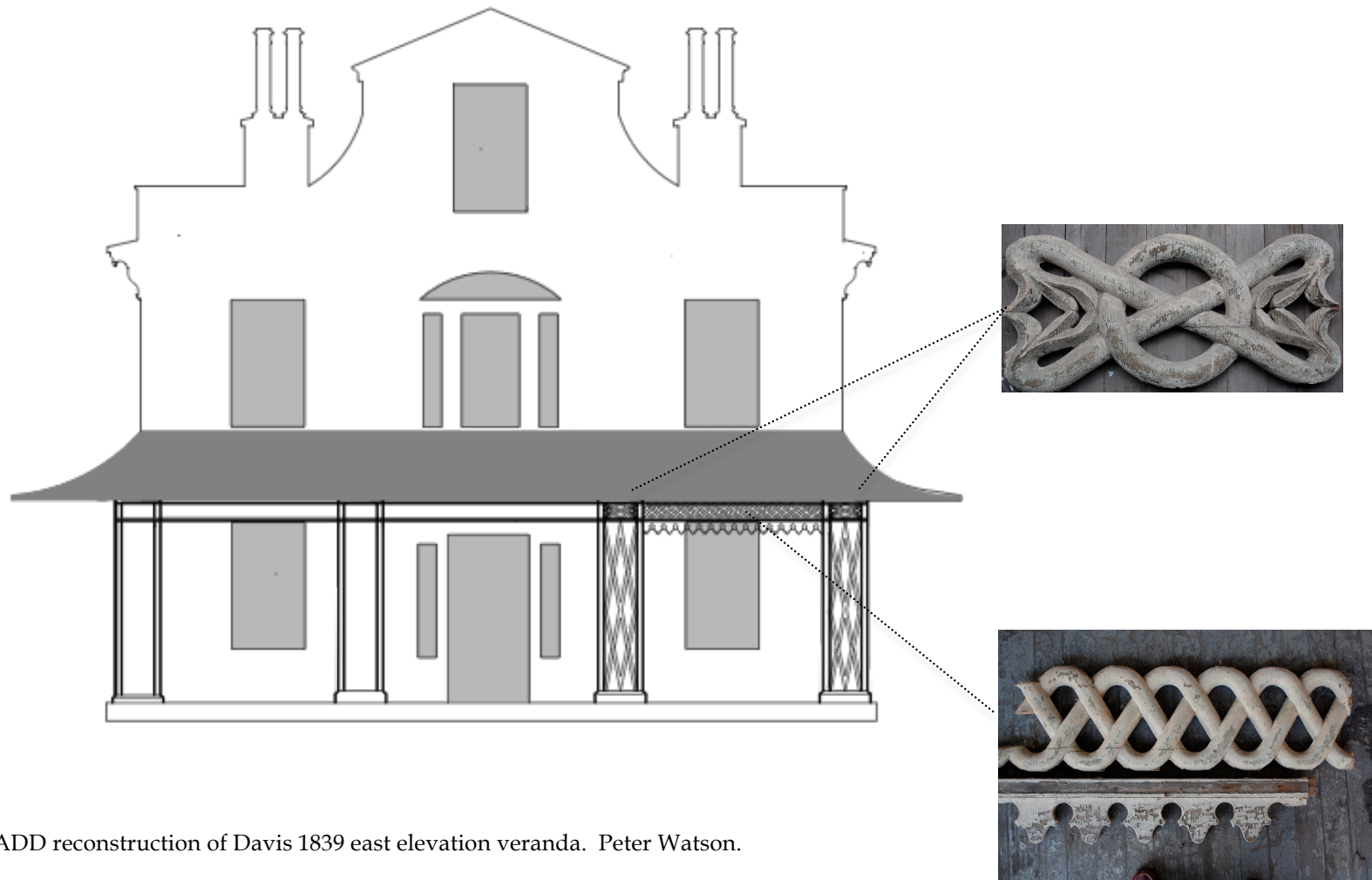
Fragments of Porch valance ornaments. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.9



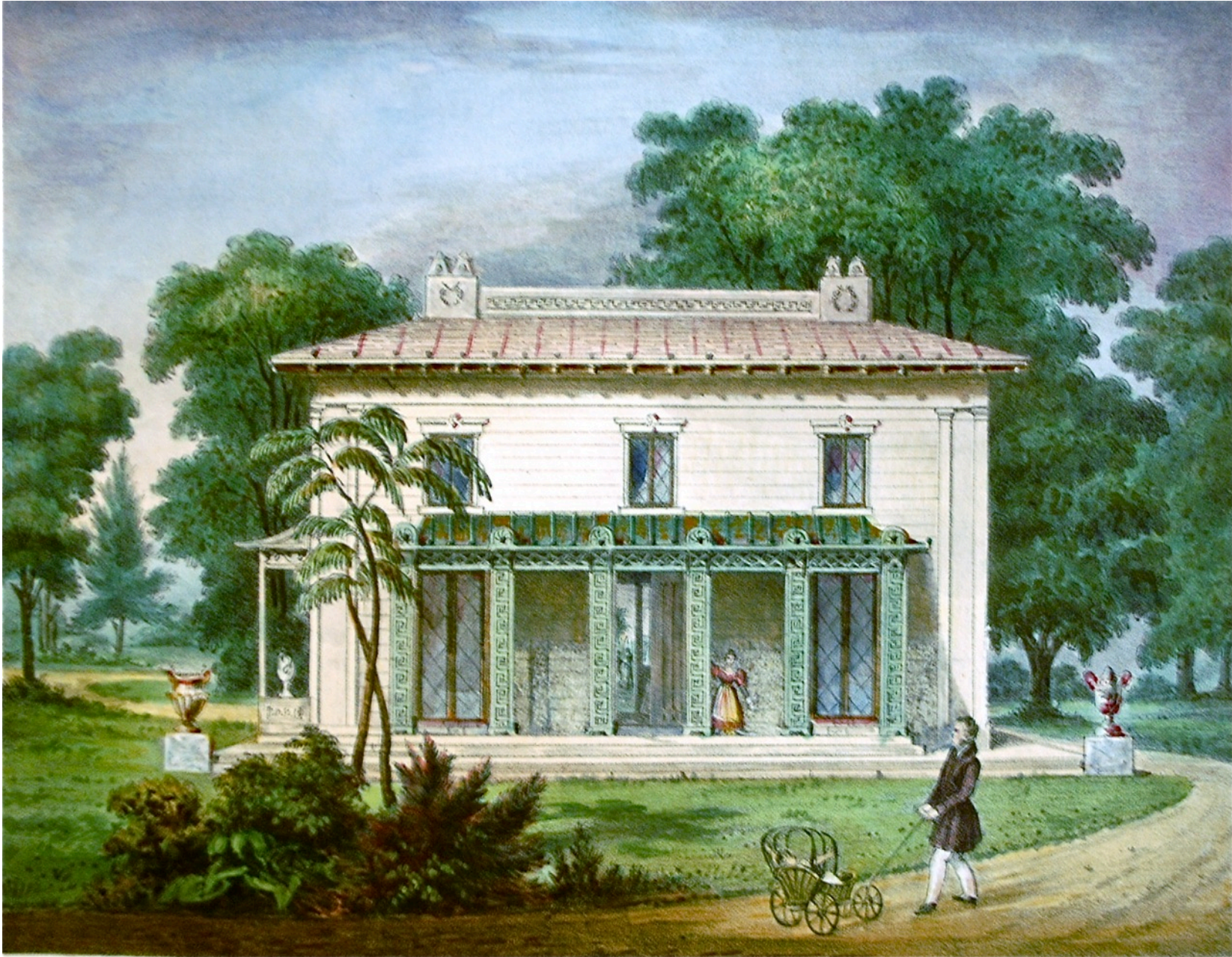
Carved knot ornament from porch valance. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.10



CADD reconstruction of Davis 1839 east elevation veranda. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.11



A.J. Davis. Villa for David Codwise, Esq. from *Rural Residences*, colored lithograph, proof state. Avery (NYDA.1955.001.00227).



Figure 4.12



T.D.W. Dearn, plate V from *Sketches in Architecture* (1807).

Figure 4.13



Ironwork verandah in Leominster Spa, circa 1810-15, from Harris, *Ornamental Ironwork: a Survey* (1982).

Figure 4.14

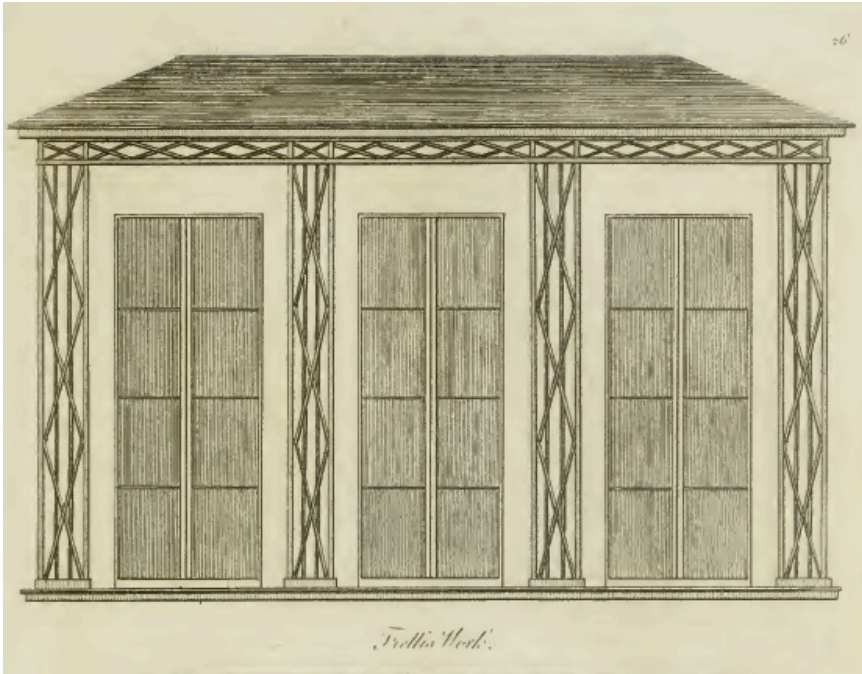
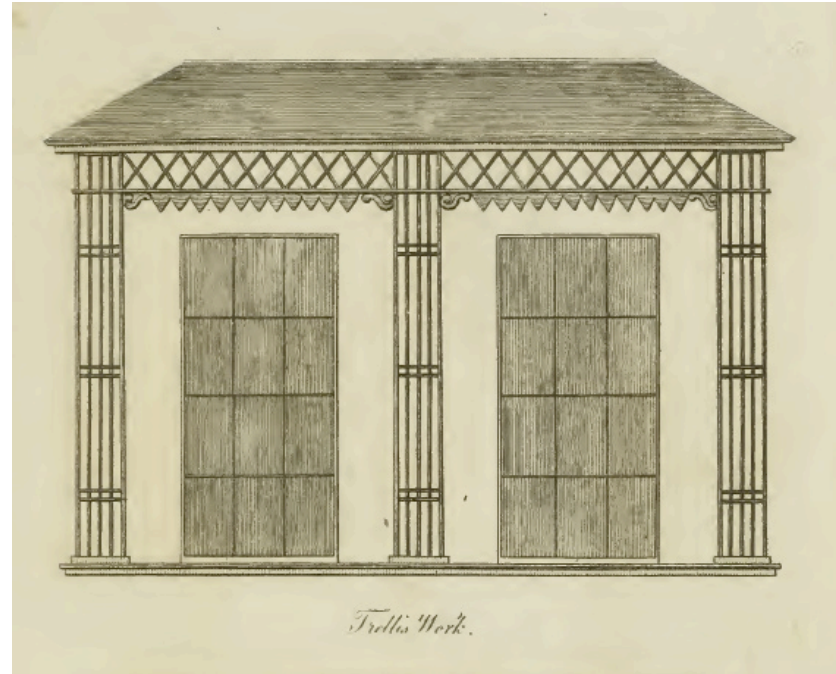
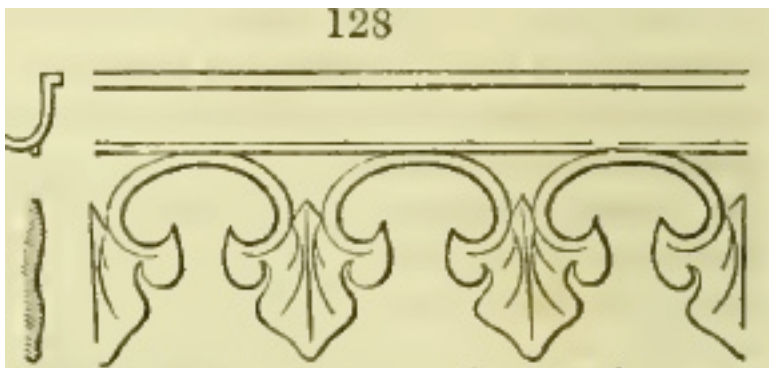
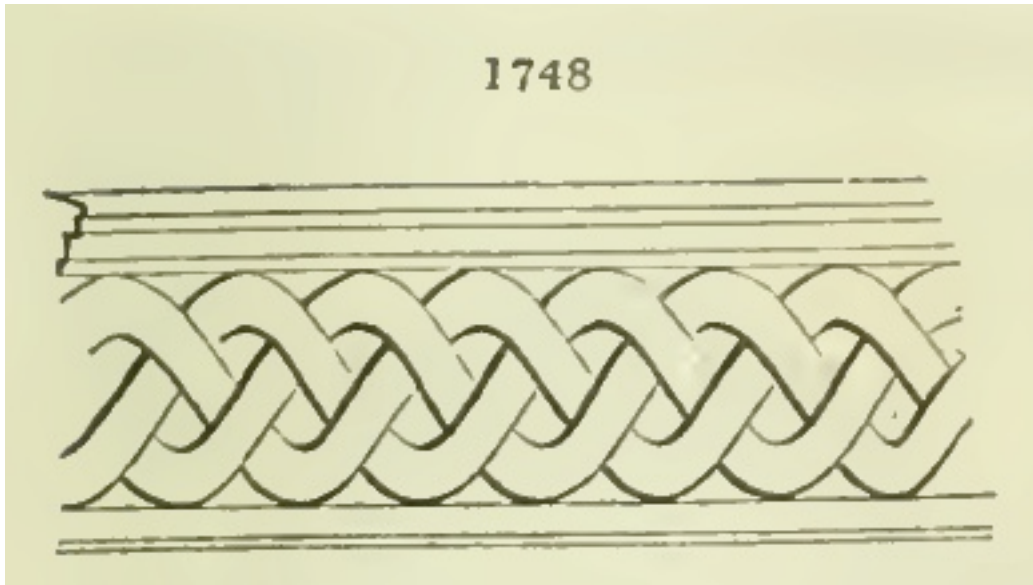


Figure 4.15



Charles Middleton. Unnumbered plates from *Designs for Gates and Rails suitable to Parks, Pleasure Grounds* (1818).

Figure 4.16



John Claudius Loudon. Designs for ornaments from *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1839.

Figure 4.17



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Mid-roof brackets. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.18



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Egg-and-dart vergeboards. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.19



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Detail of ornament on front door, east elevation. Peter Watson.

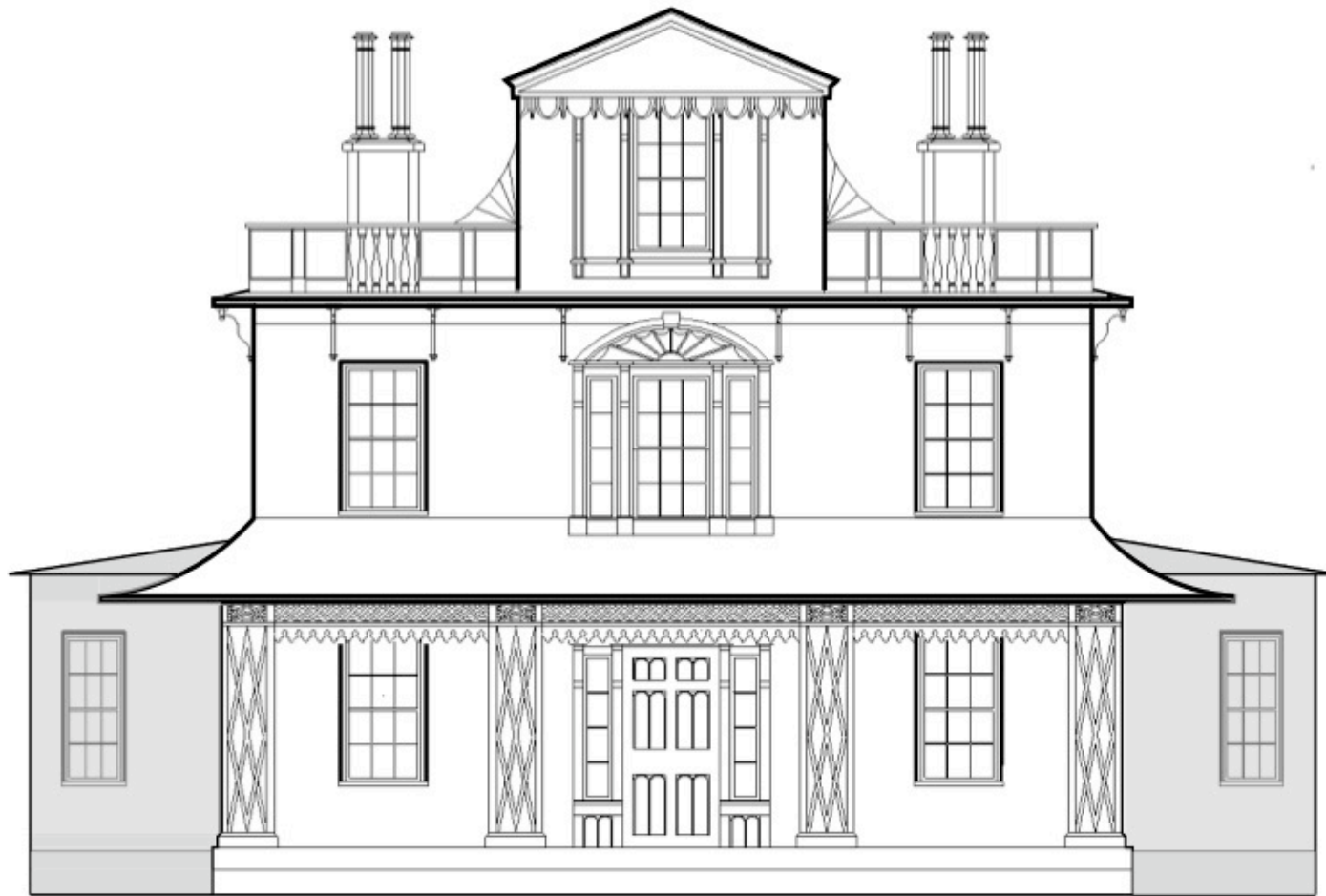
Figure 4.20



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Detail of chimney post, N.E. chimney. Peter Watson.

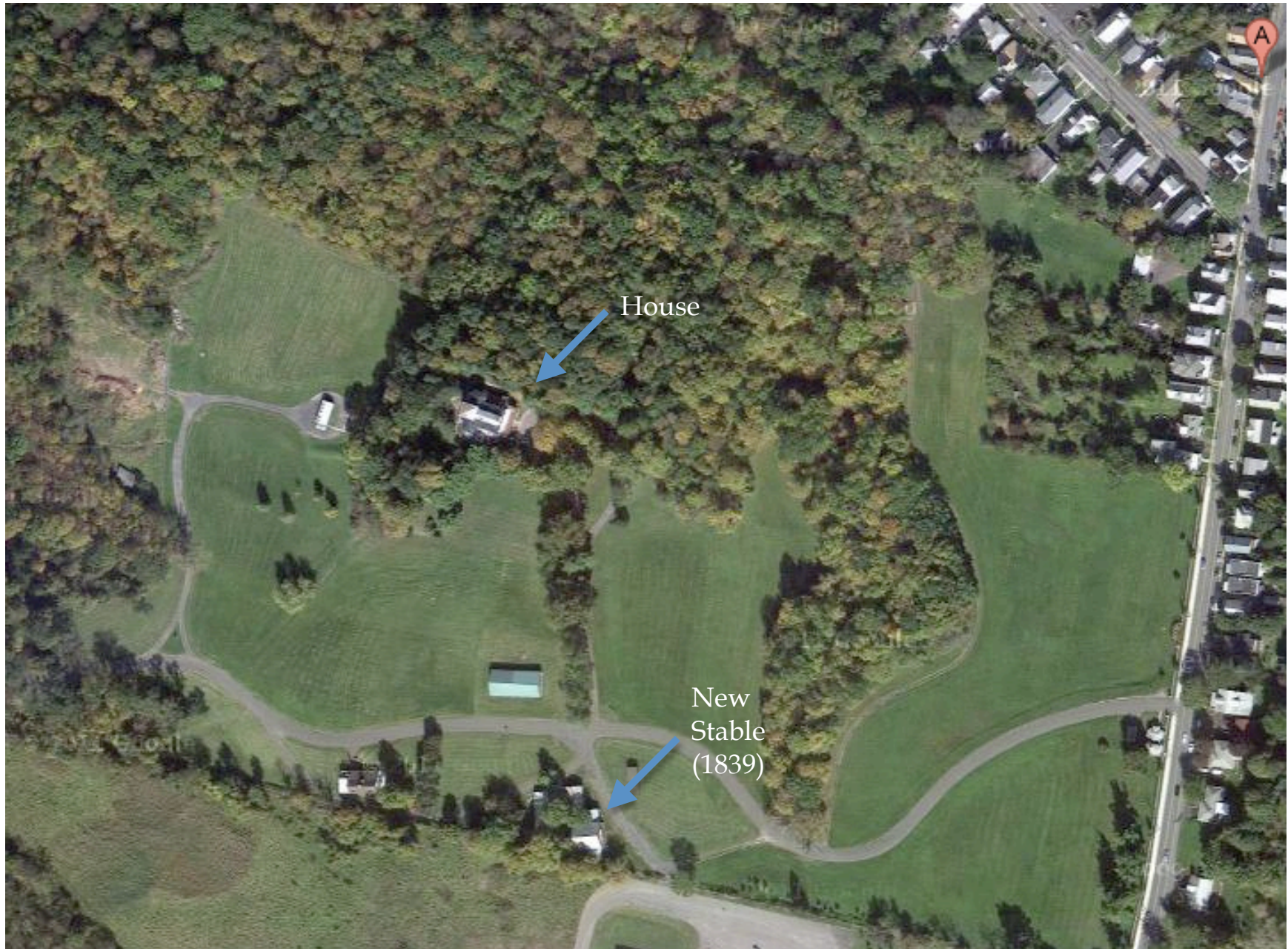


Figure 4.21



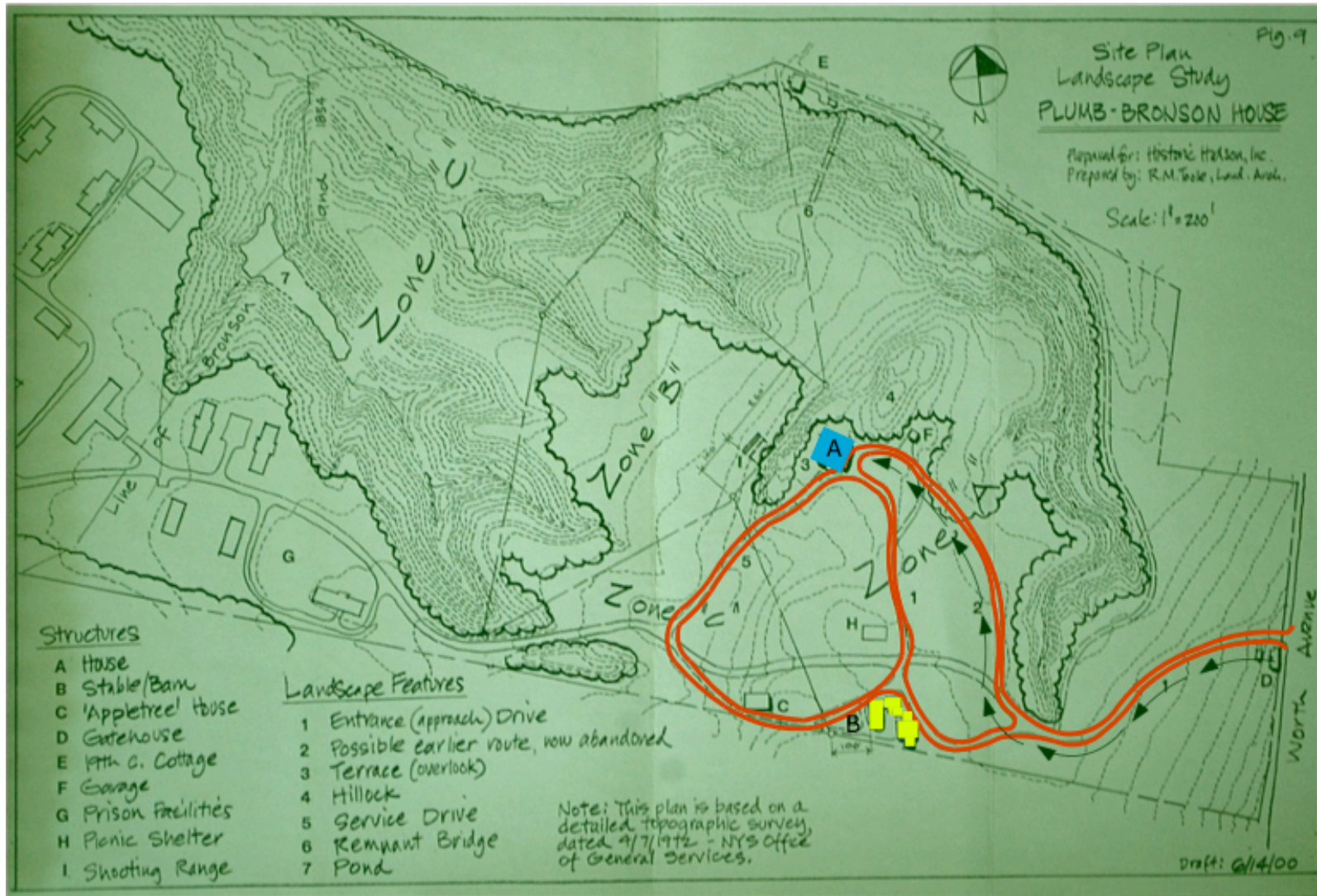
CADD reconstruction of east elevation of Dr. Oliver Bronson House, circa 1839. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.22



Aerial photo of Dr. Oliver Bronson House, circa 2012. GoogleEarth.

Figure 4.23



Reconstruction of 1839 Approach and Carriage Loop. Map: Robert Toole. Analysis: Peter Watson.

Figure 4.24



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Bracketed Stable Complex by A.J. Davis. Image: Peter Watson.

Figure 4.25



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Belt of trees on (return loop). Peter Watson.

Figure 4.26



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Initial view from approach drive. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.27



A.J. Davis. Landscape View of Schem's Wood, 1839. Avery (NYDA.1955.001.00523).

Figure 4.28



A.J. Davis. Landscape sketch of Dr. Oliver Bronson House, west elevation, circa 1849. Avery (NYDA.1955.001.00304).

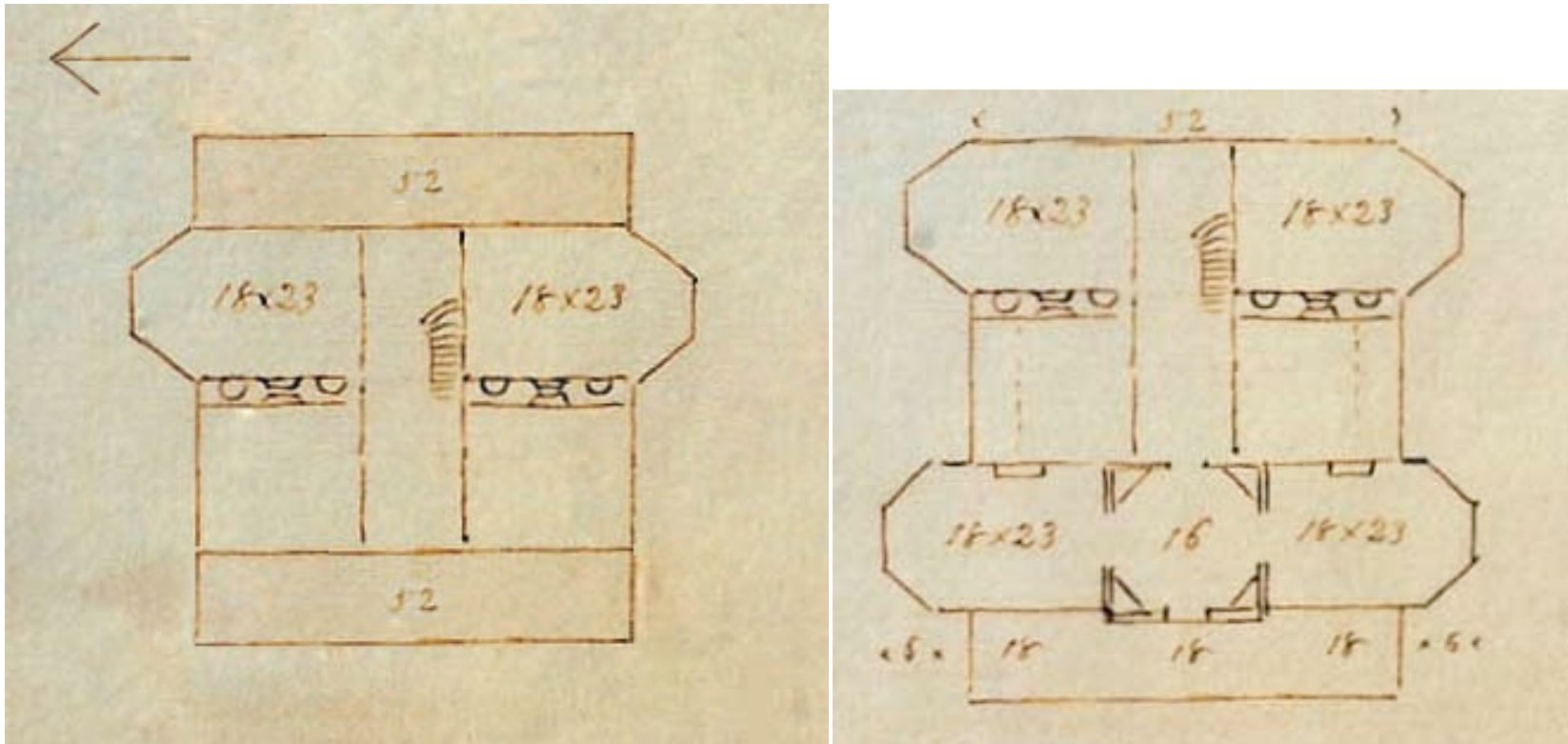


Figure 4.29



A.J. Davis. Italianate Tower addition (circa 1844) to Blandwood, Greensboro, N.C. Image: Wikipedia.

Figure 4.30



Right Image. Sketch of new floor plan for Dr. O. Bronson, Officebook, circa 1849. MMA (24.66.1400).

Left Image: Photoshop reconstruction of original Samuel Plumb house plan, circa 1812 using Davis 1849 sketch as basis. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.31



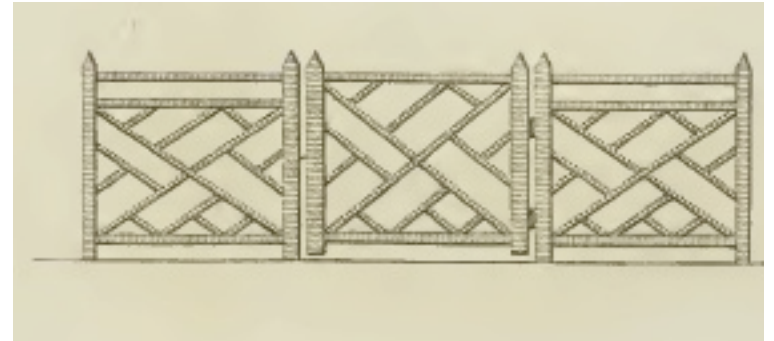
Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Detail of Norman arcading on west verandah. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.32



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Historic photo (circa 1880s?) showing west verandah. Rowles Studio collection, courtesy Historic Hudson.

Figure 4.33



Charles Middleton. Unnumbered plate from *Designs for Gates and Rails for Parks, Pleasure Grounds* (1818).

Figure 4.34



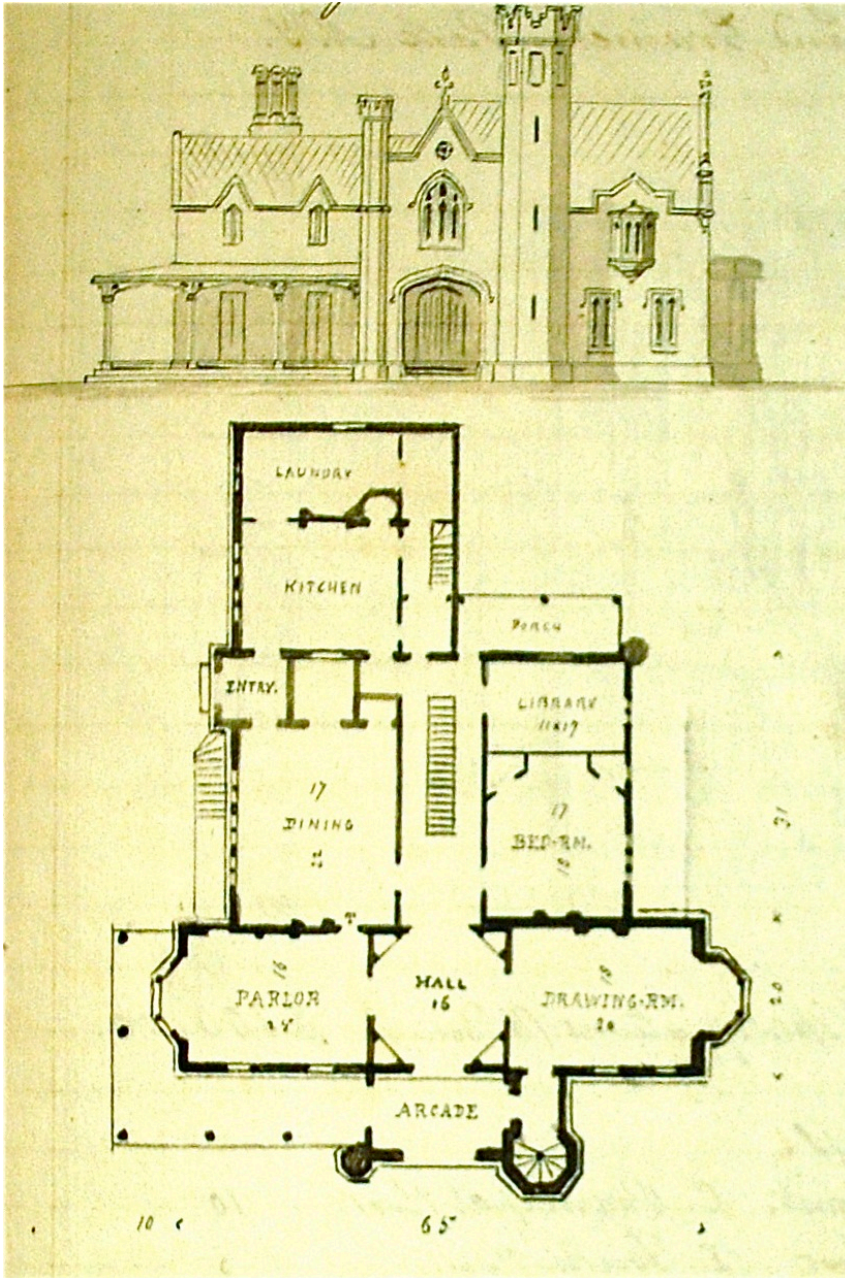
Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Historic photo (1870s?) of men on sitting on verandah with view through center hall to other side of house. Rowles Studio Collection, courtesy of Historic Hudson.

Figure 4.35



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. View through 1849 parlors (gallery is beyond first set of pocket doors). Peter Watson.

Figure 4.36



A.J. Davis. Office Journal sketch of H.K. Haral residence, Bridgeport, CT, circa 1846. MMA (24.66.1400).

Figure 4.37



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Detail of prospect tower fenestration showing location of original blind jalousies now covered over with shingles. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.38



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Surviving blind jalousie from 1849 Davis design. Peter Watson



Figure 4.39



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Detail of west elevation brackets. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.40



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. View of one-story southwest secondary bay. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.41



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. View of one-story northwest secondary bay. Peter Watson.

Figure 4.42



Dr. Oliver Bronson House. Interior view through northwest secondary bay. Peter Watson.

**Chapter 5**  
**Picturesque Transformations:**  
**Montgomery Place**  
**(1841-1873)**



## Overview

Montgomery Place is located in Annandale-on-Hudson, in northern Dutchess County, on the east bank of the Hudson River. The estate lies immediately to the south of Blithewood, on the opposite side of the Sawkill creek. Janet Livingston Montgomery (1743-1828) began the development of the estate in 1802, purchasing a 242-acre riverfront parcel, laying out a quarter-mile allée of trees along the approach, and building the original Federal-style two-story mansion. This property, which she called Chateau du Montgomery, was later renamed Montgomery Place by her youngest brother Edward P. Livingston (1764-1836), who inherited the estate in 1828 at the age of sixty-four.<sup>1</sup> Edward's political career kept him away from the house for extended periods of time and only in the final year of his life was he able to devote his attention full time to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Montgomery Place was named in honor of Janet's husband General Richard Montgomery who died heroically during the storming of Quebec in 1775 during the prelude to the Revolutionary War.

improvement of the grounds. Five years after Edward's death in 1836, his widow Louise d'Avezac de Castera Livingston (1782-1860), and their daughter Coralie Livingston Barton (1806-1873) retained A.J. Davis to transform the main house. Between 1841 to 1843, David developed and refined designs for additions to all four sides of the original house including the construction of an open pavilion on the north side of the house, a one-story addition to the south, a portico over an existing raised terrace on the west elevation and a redesigned entry portico on the east elevation. After the initial house redesign, Davis was called upon by Cora Barton and her husband Thomas Pennant Barton (1803 - 1869) to provide designs for a number of picturesque outbuildings including an Italianate gate lodge (1845), a Chinese bridge (1846-47), and various rustic pavilions and garden structures. Following the death of Louise Livingston, the Bartons commissioned Davis to begin another wave of redesign work to the main house including the addition of an elaborate semi-circular portico to the east elevation of the house (1863), and the creation of a new roof top balustrade and ornamental attic story dormers (1863). Davis also supplied designs for a carriage house (1859), board and batten farmhouse (1861), and double Swiss Cottage (1867) built to house mill workers. The house was passed down through the family until 1986 when the property was taken over by Sleepy Hollow Restorations (now Historic Hudson Valley), which began the restoration of the house and grounds and now operate the site as a house museum. The site was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1990.

### **Historical Background**

Louise d'Avezac de Castera Livingston (figure 5.1) had been born in Santo Domingo, at that time a French colony, into the family of wealthy and cultivated planters. Her early life had been marked by the violence of the Revolution in

Haiti that claimed the life of her two older brothers and uncle.<sup>2</sup> At the age of thirteen, her parents arranged her marriage to a former French officer, Moreau de Massey, who took her to his estates in Jamaica to escape the bloodshed. She bore three children in short succession, all of whom died in infancy, and then was widowed at the age of sixteen. After attempting to return to Santo Domingo, she and several family members escaped on a British frigate to New Orleans. In New Orleans, she met Edward P. Livingston, who was trying to make a fresh start after an embezzlement scandal perpetuated by a member of his staff in the attorney general's office in New York.<sup>3</sup> In 1805, thirty-nine year old Edward, and nineteen-year-old Louise were married. Over the next thirty years of their married life, Louise helped her husband steadily rise in his political career, culminating in his appointment by President Andrew Jackson as Secretary of State (1831-1833). Louise was renowned for her intellect and wit and became intimate with leading political figures such as Jackson and Martin Van Buren. During Edward's tenure as Minister to France (1833-35) Louise, her daughter Cora and son-in-law Thomas Barton (figure 5.2), were active in French cultural life, participating in the salons of Madame Recamier, Chateaubriand, and Guizot and visiting the estates and landscape gardens of France and England. After returning to the United States, Edward Livingston intended to

---

<sup>2</sup> Biographical information in this section about Louise Livingston was derived from Louise Livingston Hunt, *Memoir of Mrs. Edward Livingston with Letters Hereto Unpublished* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1886). Other accounts avoid mention of any children from the first marriage and increase her age at the time of her second marriage to Edward Livingston from nineteen to twenty four. Hunt, 12.

<sup>3</sup>An audit in 1803 had revealed that a clerk in Edward P. Livingston's Attorney General office had embezzled \$44,000 of tax collections. Livingston was cleared of any wrongdoing. But President Thomas Jefferson applied political pressure to force Livingston (a Federalist) to resign both his office as Attorney General and simultaneous role as Mayor of New York. Livingston voluntarily accepted a fine of \$100,000 by the U.S. Government, which he paid in subsequent years.



enjoy his retirement improving the grounds at Montgomery Place. In October 1835, he wrote a friend "We are all very well and very busy, planting, cutting down, leveling, sloping, opening views, clearing walks, and preparing much work for the ensuing spring to embellish."<sup>4</sup> But Edward's death in May of 1836 cut short this effort and his widow spent most of the next five years settling his affairs.<sup>5</sup>

### **Enter A.J. Davis**

Davis's Day Book reveals that he first met the redoubtable Louise Livingston in October 1841 while he was visiting at Blithewood. After a chance encounter with Mrs. Cora Barton on Cruger's Island, Davis was invited to meet Louise and Cora in the garden where they "talked of additions and art until 3."<sup>6</sup> On October 25, he was invited by "written invitation" to dinner with members of the Livingston clan. He must have acquitted himself well since the following day he recorded "At Blithewood, read Shakespeare with Judge Gaston [Susan Donaldson's father], sketched and planned for additions to B. and also at Montgomery Place."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Edward Livingston quoted in Robert Toole, *Landscape Gardens of the Hudson Valley* (Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press), 61.

<sup>5</sup> While Louise was able to restore some degree of organization to Edward's financial affairs immediately after his death, the full settlement of his estate went on for many more years. A large portion of Edward's assets was in New Orleans real estate including the famous Batture lands (alluvially deposited land from the Mississippi River) that were the subject of an extended public dispute and lawsuit with President Jefferson (Jefferson v. Livingston, 1811). Through constant effort and a network of friends, Louise was finally able to reach a financial settlement on these lands in 1850.

<sup>6</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 225.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

This evocative entry is characteristic of the entwined development of Blithewood and Montgomery Place.<sup>8</sup> It also speaks to Davis's broad artistic interests, and the way his professional life was tied up with rounds of social visiting. In subsequent years, Davis continued to plan his Hudson River visits jointly, staying with the Livingstons or the Donaldsons and visiting with the other after which he might continue up the North River to call on Dr. Bronson and his wife or the painter Thomas Cole who lived in Catskill on the western side of the Hudson. This pattern of social interactions created a degree of cross-pollination of ideas in Davis's designs. But, in the case of Montgomery Place, the strong personalities and taste of clients also intervened to shape the nature of the designs that were executed.

### **The Original House (1805)**

Janet Montgomery's house was a two-and-a half story Federal-style structure constructed of rubble stone covered by stucco. The east elevation of the house featured a conventional five bay, center hall design highlighted by a Venetian (Palladian) window with a blind arch on the second story. The hipped roof over the second story was framed by a pair of interior chimneys on either end of the house. A balustrade, pierced by oval windows for the attic story servant rooms, wrapped around the entire perimeter of the roof. This design is very similar to that of Clermont (originally built 1728), the Livingston family seat that Janet had grown up in which had been rebuilt in the late 1770s after being burned by the British during the Revolutionary War (figure 5.3). Unlike the rather severe

---

<sup>8</sup> This intertwined development stretched to the estates themselves. Early in the same year, Louise Livingston and Robert Donaldson had collaborated on the purchase of the Sawkill land (discussed in Chapter 3) between their respective properties which later were linked by a path system and grouping of related picturesque outbuildings and rustic bridges all designed by Davis.

eighteenth century appearance of the east elevation, the other side of Janet Livingston's house was more up to date, consisting of a six-bay composition with extended parlor windows on the first floor level that allowed direct access onto a raised terrace overlooking the river (figure 5.4).

### **Davis Redesign (1841-43)**

Approximately two weeks after his initial visit to Montgomery Place, Davis reported on November 5, 1841 that he was working on "Designs for Mrs. Edward Livingston of Montgomery Place. Additions to old house on 4 sides. Piazza, Pavillion. Trellis, South Wing 34 x 18 & 20 x 14. To date 50."<sup>9</sup> But two years later, Davis was still working on the designs. During a two night stay on October 24-25, 1843, Davis "made plans and elevations in pencil for wing addition to house Styles [sic], columns, Imposts and Arches to Pavillion on Right. Wing with Pilasters 25.00"<sup>10</sup> After returning to his offices in New York, he "sent up windows and balustrades."<sup>11</sup> The following spring, Louise Livingston entered into a construction contract with a "Mr. Sternberg" and the new additions were finally completed in June 1844.<sup>12</sup>

What accounts for the long delay in executing this house re-design? Certainly Davis was extremely excited to have the Livingstons as a new client and threw himself into the work immediately. Some clues into understanding this may be found in comparing the two entries. In the first, Davis writes of a "trellis" and

---

<sup>9</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 227.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jacquetta Haley, *Montgomery Place National Historic Landmark Nomination Report* (Tarrytown: Historic Hudson Valley, 1990), Section 7, page 3.

later writes of a pavilion with “imposts and arches.” The latter reflects the final Classical revival design of the north and south additions. Evidently, Davis first proposed a picturesque trellised verandah overlay to the house following his approach at both Blithewood and the Bronson House. An undated pen and wash drawing of Montgomery Place appears to reproduce elements of Davis’s original 1841 design (figure 5.5).<sup>13</sup> Here, Davis introduces picturesque asymmetry into the composition by pairing an extended two-story addition of the left (south) with an open trellis pavilion on the right (north) side. The exotic detailing of the canopy and oriel window on the south wing (left) add a further note of variety and asymmetry to the design.

But as a surviving letter dated May 26 (1842?) from Louise Livingston to Davis attests, the client was not interested in picturesque trellises on her classical house: “On your present design [for the north pavilion], the roof is supported by trellis pillars intended for training vines – If the difference in price is not too great I would prefer columns [sic] are more in keeping with the whole building.”<sup>14</sup> She goes on to provide a sketch of an alternate design (figure 5.6) incorporating what she calls a “clump column” which referenced the colonnettes of the original Federal house interior. In another undated letter, she requests that Davis scale down the south addition, softening the blow by appealing to his ego: “I have lowered my views very much in regard to the South Wing. Now my ambition does not go higher than a one-story building. This change requires so many others that we cannot proceed without the aid of your taste, experience,

---

<sup>13</sup> This heavily worked and somewhat tattered wash drawing has at least two layers of ink work suggesting that Davis recycled a drawing from the 1841-43 redesign campaign to work out details of his new additions in the 1860s. The original drawing showing Davis’s initial proposal for the two wings was worked out in light green ink.

<sup>14</sup> Louise Livingston letter to AJD, dated May 26, [1842?]. Avery.

and skillful pencil.”<sup>15</sup> Louise Livingston also appears to have been the source of the elaborate low-relief ornaments that decorate the entire design. In her May 26 letter to Davis, she wrote that upon arriving here [Montgomery Place]. I discovered that the cornice of our portico was too plain for the columns of their rich capitals. Pray, my dear Sir, have the goodness to select an ornament to suit our purposes. I wish something of the running pattern want Stucco ornaments as the cheapest and soonest procured.”<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, Louise Livingston was an exacting client that knew her own mind and was actively involved in the details of the design process. And her architectural tastes, deepened by her experience living in Paris in the mid-1830s, appear to have favored Classicism, which was still popular in France, over the more romantic English styles.<sup>17</sup> Davis’s two-year struggle was in finding a design that expressed his own picturesque sensibilities in classical language acceptable to his client. The solution he ultimately came up with in 1843 was one of the great designs of his career. And this re-design, like Davis’s other Hudson Valley projects, drew inspiration from his reading of English landscape gardening sources.

---

<sup>15</sup> Undated Louise Livingston letter to AJD. Avery.

<sup>16</sup> Louise Livingston letter to AJD, dated May 26, [1842]. Avery.

<sup>17</sup> None of the surviving letters between Louise Livingston and Davis mention the themes and concepts of the English Picturesque or landscape gardening. The dialogue is exclusively architectural and cast in the language of classicism. Her chief concerns appear to have been the proportion of various architectural elements of the new additions and the need to further embellish them with cast composition ornament.

## Classical Asymmetry

Davis' 1843 additions to Montgomery Place recreated a familiar Palladian formula: the original two-and-half-story central core was balanced by a pair of one-story wings (figure 5.7). In Davis's final design, picturesque asymmetry and variety are still present but are more subtly expressed. Both wings are one-story frame structures of equivalent footprint (roughly 32 x 18) with semi-octagonal ends. And both are ornamented with Classical detailing. But the open pavilion on the north employed engaged Corinthian columns set between arched openings while the south wing used pilasters to frame rectangular openings (figure 5.8). To add further variety, Davis embellished the canted faces of the south wing with blind arches (rather than rectangular frame or open arches) (figure 5.9). This playful and varied use of classical forms extends to the basic language Davis employed in the design. Following the original Federal style of the original house, Davis used Roman Classical forms for most of the main decorative scheme. Over the first floor windows; however, Davis adds elaborate Greek Revival anthemion carvings. And in distinction to the highly ornamented first floor windows, the second floor windows have simple Italianate dressings (figure 5.10). To complete his design, Davis added a variety of low-relief cast composition ornament to many of the surfaces of the building.

To knit this complex and highly ornamented scheme together, Davis employed one of Humphry Repton's characteristic architectural transformation strategies: color. In many redesign projects, Repton recommended that the exterior be painted "a pale stone color."<sup>18</sup> The 1844 Montgomery Place construction contract

---

<sup>18</sup> For example, Repton recommended painting the whole a "light stone color" at Babworth, Lamer, Taplow, Wembly, and Woodley. According to Repton, the effect of stone could be produced by "a little black and yellow mixed with the lime." Repton, 262.

specified that the entire building be sanded and painted “so as to look exactly like stone.”<sup>19</sup> The sanded paint “was applied in two or three different tones to simulate variation in stone color. The joints were simulated by thin white lines. The shutters were painted green and the trim white.”<sup>20</sup> Repton believed that architecture should be evaluated by its general effects when viewed from a distance as part of larger landscape composition. As historian George Carter has noted, Repton believed that “painting the house a stone colour helped reduce the [general] effect to one purely of light and shade.”<sup>21</sup> That Davis was conscious of this effect can be seen in one of his surviving landscape views of Montgomery (figure 5.11). Here, the light paint scheme allows the differences in the treatment of the parts to recede and be read as a single unified and symmetrical composition.

### **The North Pavilion (1841-43)**

The highlight of Davis’s redesign was a large one-story semi-octagonal pavilion on the north side of the house modeled on a Roman arcade. The pavilion, on the shady side of the house, frames extensive views of the Hudson to the west through its soaring arches (figure 5.12). Here while the language is classical, the effect is highly picturesque. In 1847, Davis drew a watercolor view looking

---

<sup>19</sup> Agreement between Mr. Sternberg and Mrs. Livingston dated 1844, collection of Historic Hudson Valley. Quoted in NHL report, section 7, page 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Davis used the same color scheme at Blithewood.

<sup>21</sup> George Carter, “Architecture” in *Humphry Repton, Landscape Gardener, 1752-1818* (Norwich, East Anglia: Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 1982), 81.

through this pavilion to the sparkling river and the Catskill Mountains in the distance (figure 5.13).<sup>22</sup>

Davis's landscape composition of an attached octagonal pavilion dramatically framing river and mountain views could have been influenced by a plate in Repton's *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803) that Davis had long consulted (figure 5.14). While Repton's pavilion is lit by the moon rather than the sun and employs Gothic rather than Classical vocabulary, it relates to the landscape and the house in a markedly similar way.

Commenting on his design, Repton wrote, "there are many summer evenings when such a pavilion would add new interest to the magnificent scenery of water and mountains with which Plas-Newydd everywhere abounds."<sup>23</sup> A.J. Davis, working in a different architectural vocabulary on a different continent, achieved a similarly painterly composition of architecture and landscape. Here, Davis uses the solidity of the Classical architecture to full effect. This is not merely a verandah but a large and commodious outdoor parlor.

### **The Terrace Balustrade (1842-43)**

A more direct borrowing from Repton was Davis's design for a new raised terrace and balustrade that completely wrapped around the main body of the house (figure 5.15), linking the new "parts of the house with each other and to the landscape."<sup>24</sup> Departing from the practice of his predecessor, Lancelot

---

<sup>22</sup> This view was commissioned by Andrew Jackson Downing who used an engraved version of this landscape picture in a famous article in *The Horticulturalist* entitled "A Visit to Montgomery Place" (Oct 1847). He also included it the third edition of *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1849).

<sup>23</sup> Repton, 218.

<sup>24</sup> Jane B. Davies, quoted in NHL Nomination Report, Section 2, page 3.



Capability Brown, who favored lawns sweeping directly up the main house, Humphry Repton argued for the return of formal architectural terraces around a house complete with balustrades and decorative urns. Repton referred to these forms as “a fence near the house” and included them in many of his compositions. Their purpose was at once artistic and practical, visually framing the house and prospects, as well as providing an all-season walk safe from the depredations of roaming livestock (figure 5.16). It was the use of a terrace as a protected walkway and sitting area that appears to have shaped Davis’s design at Montgomery Place (figure 5.17).

Following the death of her husband, Louise Livingston’s health had rapidly declined and she became an invalid. The new south wing was designed to serve as a ground floor bedroom for Louise with an alcove for a live in maid (figure 5.18). The raised terrace that wrapped around the house would have allowed her to experience the views from all sides of the house without leaving the safety of the porch.<sup>25</sup> Repton would have approved of this creative design solution, believing that buildings should be adapted “not only to the situation, character, and circumstances of the scenery, but also to the purposes for they are intended, this I shall call characteristic architecture.”<sup>26</sup>

### **A Picturesque Landscape (1843-70)**

Louise Livingston’s infirmity, and perhaps her taste, precluded her being actively involved in shaping the landscape at Montgomery Place. But her daughter Cora and son-in-law Thomas Barton began embracing this task with a

---

<sup>25</sup> The modern-day curators of Montgomery Place have utilized this same design feature to provide wheelchair accessibility for disabled visitors.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, 303.

passion. Already an avid horticulturalist, Cora Barton had artist and architect Frederick Catherwood (1799-1854) design an elaborate English-style Gothic conservatory southwest of the house in 1839 (figure 5.19).<sup>27</sup> With Davis' arrival on the scene, the Bartons began using architecture, paths and plantings to compose the property into distinct landscape scenes following the precepts of English landscape gardening.<sup>28</sup>

An early indication of this new direction at Montgomery Place can be found in Davis's Day Book where he noted that on October 26 1843 he had "walked 3 m

---

<sup>27</sup> Frederick Catherwood was an English architect and artist who is best known as an early explorer of Mayan ruins in the Yucatan. Relatively little information is available about Catherwood's role in designing the original Montgomery Place conservatory, which was taken down in the 1880s. The construction date of 1839 overlaps with Catherwood's first eleven-month journey to Mexico so it is possible that he provided the design prior to leaving the country. Catherwood does not appear to have been involved in any landscape gardening at Montgomery Place after the construction of this building.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Barton was a noted bibliophile whose twelve thousand-volume library was sold by Cora Barton to the Boston Public Library after his death in 1869. The focus of his collecting activity related to original editions of Shakespeare's plays. But a catalog of this collection shows that his library contained many of the key works of English landscape gardening including works by Alison, Burke, Gilpin Knight, Loudon, Pope, Price, Repton and Walpole. Interestingly, the only work by Downing is the second edition of a *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1844). Barton's collection included only a few works on architecture including J.B. Papworth's *Rural Residences* (1818); an English villa book that may have inspired Davis's own *Rural Residences* (1838). Interpreting the sources and timing of Thomas Barton's interest in English landscape gardening is difficult. It could have been spurred by Davis or Downing (who became acquainted with the Bartons some time between 1841-1844), or both individuals. It could have also predated Barton's association with either Davis or Downing. The most likely answer is some combination of the above: Barton, already somewhat familiar with landscape gardening, receiving a major push in this direction from Davis who arrived first on the scene, and amplified by Downing who was actively collaborating with Davis during this period and began supplying plant material and informal landscaping advice.

with Mrs. Barton exam[in]ing] rustic seats and views.”<sup>29</sup> And even as classicism still dominated the design of the main house, Davis and the Bartons introduced the diverse and exotic styles of the English picturesque to the new structures being planned for the grounds.

### **Italianate Gate Lodge and Entrance (1845-47)**

In 1844, and again in 1845, Davis sent a design by letter for a gate lodge to Mrs. Barton. Davis’ gatehouse (figure 5.20) was in the form of a thirty-foot tall Italianate prospect tower with a recessed doorway. The composition is asymmetric, with stepped massing to the right of the tower balancing the implied void of the entranceway. This design fits within the long tradition of ornamental English park entrance lodges. The square prospect tower with pyramidal roof and projecting rafters relates to both Davis’s designs for Italianate villas of the 1840s and more specifically to Italianate entrance lodge forms contained in English picturesque villa books. A related design, drawn by Davis for Downing’s treatise on landscape gardening (Figure 5.21) was also likely derived from an as yet undetermined English pattern book source. Neither Davis’s first or second gate lodge design was built.

Two years later, in July of 1847, Davis provided a pencil design (figure 5.22) for a new entrance gate and pedestal post “for Mrs. Edward Livingston.”<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, this new gate design is in the more formal Classical language of the main house rather than the rustic Italianate vocabulary of the unexecuted gate lodge. Perhaps Mrs. Livingston objected to the architectural style of the gate

---

<sup>29</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 250.

<sup>30</sup> 1847 July 24 Gates and post pedestal fro Mrs. Ed. Livingston 5.00. Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 347.

lodge as well as its expense. It does appear that some type of entrance gate was built but it is unknown how closely it matched Davis's design.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Chinese Covered Bridge (1846-47)**

At the same time Davis was working on designs for the approach to Montgomery Place, he was also supplying designs for increasingly exotic garden structures. One particularly fanciful design (figure 5.23) is probably the "Chinese covered bridge" referred to in a letter from Cora Barton to A.J. Davis.<sup>32</sup> The "a-frame" structure of this small bridge appears to be formed from unpeeled logs and covered with a tent-like canopy.<sup>33</sup> The canopied or covered bridge is an unusual picturesque form. English architect and landscape gardener J.B. Papworth provides several designs (figure 5.24) for covered bridges in his *Hints on Ornamental Gardening* that he had purchased several years before.<sup>34</sup> It is uncertain whether this exotic design was ever executed. Cora Barton wrote A.J. Davis diplomatically: "the bridge is certainly "unique" but we have determined

---

<sup>31</sup> In his article on Montgomery Place for *The Horticulturalist*, Downing mentions the entrance gate in a fashion that it was executed in something like Davis's design for Mrs. Livingston. Downing writes "On the east it [the property] touches the post road. Here is the entrance gate, and from it leads a long and stately avenue of trees, like the approach to an old French Chateau." Downing, *The Horticulturalist*, 154.

<sup>32</sup> Letter dated June 24 [1846?] from Cora Barton to A.J.D. Avery.

<sup>33</sup> The rustic bridge A.J. Davis designed for Robert Donaldson on the other side of the Sawkill has a similar "A-frame" structure. Perhaps the source was a bridge designed by Ithiel Town or a bridge engineering manual from Town's library that Davis had access to. Davis and Town had briefly renewed their partnership in 1842 and Town is known to have visited Blithewood with Davis during the summer of 1842. Davis, *Day Book*, Vol. 1, 242.

<sup>34</sup> Davis, *Day Book*, Vol. 1, 204.

not to undertake it until we have seen you...in order to have it as perfect as your oral instructions alone, can make it.”<sup>35</sup> This note also suggests that many of these small-scale garden structures designed by Davis were worked out on the spot with the carpenters. Davis’s artistic facility and experience as a working architect made this possible. But it complicates later-day efforts to understand the chronology of his designs.

### **The Landscape Garden, circa 1847**

While some of Davis’s designs and compositions for the landscape at Montgomery Place were not executed, many others were. And Davis was credited by Cora Barton for making important contributions: “As for your own imaginings for the improvement of Montgomery – their success has been prodigious – I hope next summer you will come and judge of the effect yourself.”<sup>36</sup> In July of 1847, Andrew Jackson Downing commissioned Davis to make a series of watercolor sketches of the various landscape scenes at Montgomery Place which were used to produce engravings for an article entitled “A Visit to Montgomery Place” in *The Horticulturalist*. In rapturous terms, Downing describes the sequence of garden scenes the Bartons, with the assistance of both Davis and Downing, had created. The tour moved from the west terrace of the main house to the Morning Walk that ran along the shoreline at the edge of the lawn, to the Wilderness along the northern border of the property with Blithewood, to the Wildness, to the Cateract (lower falls of the Sawkill), to the Lake (formed from the original millpond on the Sawkill), to the

---

<sup>35</sup> Letter dated June 24 [1846?] from Cora Barton to AJD. Avery. It is undocumented whether the Chinese bridge was built in the form specified by Davis.

<sup>36</sup> Cora Barton is referring primarily to Davis’s contributions to the landscape in this letter rather his reinvention of the main house.

Conservatory and Flower Garden, and lastly, down the Drive through the woods at the southern end of the property. Robert Toole has created a reconstruction (figure 5.25) of the site plan of this extensive designed landscape. The accompanying illustrations to Downing's article show a number of structures likely designed by Davis including the "Rustic Gabled Seat (figure 5.26) executed in a simple version of the English rustic cottage style used by Davis for the first gatehouse at Blithewood and a rustic temple (figure 5.27) on the peninsula which could have come from any number of English landscape gardening texts.<sup>37</sup>

### **Davis and Downing at Montgomery Place**

Downing's article made Montgomery Place widely known to the American public. But it is important to distinguish between Downing's role as a publicist and his much more limited role as a designer. As Jacquetta Haley, Director of Research at Montgomery Place has written, "Downing was never hired as a landscape architect to develop a plan for Montgomery Place. Instead he was consulted as a friend on an informal basis as problems arose, or as Cora and Thomas Barton considered new additions to the grounds and landscape."<sup>38</sup> Up until 1846, Andrew Jackson Downing operated a nursery that had been started by his father. A.J. Downing & Co. began supplying trees and shrubs to Mrs. Louise Livingston and later the Bartons in the early 1840s, and Downing later becoming a family friend and correspondent. His only documented contribution to the design of Montgomery Place was for a flower garden located near the Gothic-style conservatory (figure 5.28). Here, Downing and Cora Barton laid out a formal pattern of circular and arabesque flower beds cut into the lawn and

---

<sup>37</sup> None of these picturesque structures in the landscape have survived but many are well documented by drawings and photographs.

<sup>38</sup> NHL Nomination, 5

edged in boxwood. Downing described this garden as “a rich oriental carpet or pattern of embroidery.”<sup>39</sup> But as the description and engraving makes clear this design was in a gardenesque style advocated by Loudon rather than a picturesque one.<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately, Davis’s role in creating the landscape at Montgomery Place was more substantial than Downing’s. He participated directly as a landscape gardener, closely collaborating with Cora Barton to compose the landscape scenes and define the character of the place, he supplied designs of individual garden structures that served as focal points in the landscape, and he supervised construction. All of this was in addition to his role reworking the architecture of the main house.

### **Landscape Gardening and Representation**

While Davis’s contribution was substantial, interpreting the actual designed landscape created at Montgomery Place using Davis’s surviving sketches can be problematic (figure 5.29). As Jacquetta Haley has noted, “Davis’s sketches of rustic seats can be very deceiving. He was capable of drawing what he thought a rustic seat should look like as he was of drawing the actual seat. Similarly, in his

---

<sup>39</sup> A.J. Downing, “A visit to Montgomery Place” in *The Horticulturalist*, Vol. 2, Number 4 (October 1847),159.

<sup>40</sup> The grounds of Downing’s own home in Newburgh were originally laid out in similar gardenesque mode that was fashionable in England during the 1820s and 1830s. Later in the 1840s, however, Downing reworked his grounds in a more picturesque fashion, adding a hermitage, more naturalized beds and deep screens of trees. Interestingly, this updating by Downing connected back to an earlier style of English landscape gardening (circa 1790s vs. 1830s).

finished sketches he might eliminate existing trees or shrubs, even structures, which interfered with the vista he wished to illustrate.”<sup>41</sup>

But this is not willful or arbitrary deception by Davis but a reflection of his core landscape gardening method. In his sketches, he is painting with objects of the landscape, architectural and botanical. His sketches are not simple records of the appearance of objects but are active compositions. As Samuel Morse, his friend and early mentor wrote many years before, the landscape gardener must “possess the mind of a Landscape Painter, but he paints with the objects themselves... it is not the laborer who levels a hill, or a fills a hollow, or a plants a grove that is the landscape gardener, it is he alone who with the prophetic eye of taste, sees prospectively the full grown forest in the young plantation, and selects with a poet’s feeling passages which he knows will affect agreeably the imagination.”<sup>42</sup>

But it should not be taken from this that Davis’s sketches have no basis in reality or always projected landscapes fifty years into the future. Studied as a group, Davis’s landscape views show a strong concern for the rendering conditions precisely and accurately, often depicting rather spindly trees that look recently planted or pruned. Davis’s “imaginative horizon” appears to have been the near term potential state of the landscape useful to his clients. What will be the effect of the new rustic seat with this tree removed and that group of shrubbery added next spring? The pattern of Davis’s visits to Montgomery Place and Blithewood supports this interpretation: April or October visits to walk round and study the

---

<sup>41</sup> Jacquetta Haley. *Pleasure Grounds: Andrew Jackson Downing and Montgomery Place* (Tarrytown: Sleepy Hollow Press, 1988), 74.

<sup>42</sup> Morse, quoted in Toole, 109.



sites for new garden structures and June and July visits to supervise or see their completed effects.

### **Carriage Barn and Farm House (1859-61)**

In 1859, Davis supplied a design (figure 5.30) for a new ornamental carriage barn located on the approach drive along the edge of the east lawn. By this time, Cora and Thomas Barton had moved the complex of farm buildings, originally built by Janet Montgomery, out to the extreme eastern edge of the property, separating farm and orchards from pleasure grounds. The new carriage barn, like the main house, mixing Classical and Italianate forms, adds a picturesque character to a utilitarian purpose and skillfully used the slope of the hill to provide an entry on both floors, hiding loading operations behind the building.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Davis provided a design for a small bracketed board-and-batten farmhouse (figure 5.31) to serve as an ornamental focal point of the relocated farm complex.<sup>44</sup>

### **Temple of Vesta Portico and East Elevation Balustrade (1863)**

Following the death of her mother in 1860, Cora and Thomas Barton retained A.J. Davis to undertake a final redesign of the house. The focus of the new design was a large semicircular portico (figure 5.32) modeled on the temple of Vesta at

---

<sup>43</sup> The pediment and paired pilaster on either side of the carriage barn's projecting front gable are both within the Classical tradition, the round-headed windows with bracketed sills are more rustic Italianate in character. The round-headed door with an applied design of circles and ovals is somewhat more difficult to classify.

<sup>44</sup> This design reprises a design for a bracketed cottage in *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850) updated with a pair of Palladian windows that relate to the Classical language of the main house.

Tivoli, a well-known first century B.C. Roman temple.<sup>45</sup> The choice is interesting and revealing. In addition to being a famous remnant of the classical past, the Temple of Vesta played a major part in English landscape gardening history, being first used by William Kent as the model for his Temple of Ancient Virtue at Stowe (figure 33) completed in 1738.<sup>46</sup> Kent is said to have found his inspiration in a landscape painting by Claude Lorrain entitled *Apollo and the Muses on Mount Helion (Parnassus)* (circa 1680) which depicts a scene from Greek mythology with the Temple at Tivoli set on the steep hillside above (figure 5.34).<sup>47</sup> So, the new portico at Montgomery Place connected back to the very beginning of English landscape gardening when the association between landscape design and landscape painting was first forged. Both Davis and the Bartons would have understood and appreciated this reference.

But irrespective of the conceptual basis of the design, the practical execution of the new portico proved to be problematic. Originally, Davis planned a higher balustrade on the east elevation to offset the large size of the new portico that extended to the edge of the inner pair of windows. But due to the expense, this plan was shelved. As the new portico was completed, a worried Cora Barton

---

<sup>45</sup> Both the correspondence between Cora Barton and AJD and Davis's drawings identify the new portico with the Temple of Vesta.

<sup>46</sup> The Temple of Vesta at Tivoli was also used as a model by William Chambers in his Temple of Solitude at the Royal Gardens at Kew (circa 1757-1763). The basic circular pavilion was then extensively copied in English landscape gardens throughout the eighteenth century in both architecturally accurate and rustic forms. Davis's circular pavilion at Montgomery Place (see figure 30) is derived from the same form.

<sup>47</sup> Claude Lorrain rendered a famous scene from Greek mythology using a Roman temple which he was familiar with (Greece was not readily accessible to European visitors during its long control by the Ottoman Turks. And like his rendering, the actual Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, is a set on the edge of a steep hillside.

wrote her long-time friend: “the columns are up and the entablature is progressing. The whole thing per se is beautiful – but alas! It squashes down the whole house, & as one of the ancients said: ‘who tied that sword to my son!’ so I exclaim ‘who has clapt my house to the Temple of Vesta!’”<sup>48</sup>

To fix this problem, Davis composed a new central blocking motif and rooftop balustrade (figure 5.35) in an attempt to balance the new portico.<sup>49</sup> This addition to Davis’s design appears to have been inspired by an earlier design by William Chambers (figure 5.36) that also had an important place in landscape gardening history. The casino (little house) at Marino (circa late 1750s-1775) was a renowned ornamental Classical style building set in an Italianate garden overlooking the bay of Dublin. Like the reference to the temple of Vesta in the portico itself, design for the new balustrade and blocking harked back to the classical forms of the early English landscape gardening movement.

### **Swiss Cottage (1867)**

The last completed structure at Montgomery Place was the “factory lodge” built in 1867 to house workers at the Barton’s mills. This structure (figure 5.37) joined a grouping of industrial buildings and cottages on the far northeastern corner of the estate. Several of Davis’s sketches survive for this design that Davis also referred to as the “Double Swiss Cottage (figure 5.38).”<sup>50</sup> The choice of

---

<sup>48</sup> Letter from Cora Barton to Davis, 1863, quoted by Jane B. Davies in *Historic American Building Survey, Montgomery Place Mansion Notes HABS No. KY-5625, 4.*

<sup>49</sup> On the other side of the house, Davis created a shed dormer addition with three windows of a somewhat different character.

<sup>50</sup> The lodge, as constructed, contains element of both designs. The extensive second floor balcony was used from the top design and the roofline from the lower.

architectural style for the new building, constructed after the Civil War, is noteworthy. It represents what might be called the “persistence of the picturesque.”

Like the rustic Italianate villa style employed by Davis for the gate lodge, the Swiss cottage was a product of the English Picturesque movement and had been widely published over fifty years before. Architectural historians point to the Swiss Cottage at Tipperary (figure 5.39), designed by John Nash in 1812, as the prototype of this form. But this first essay, with its irregularly shaped thatch roof, and rustic twig-work balcony was more English than Swiss. Davis would have found more characteristic examples of this form in his picturesque villa books such as these examples from Robinson (figure 5.40) and Loudon (figure 5.41). The latter design includes not only the broad overhanging eaves and ornamental balconies that are hallmarks of this style, but also the specific form of jerkin-headed roof Davis used. Characteristically, Davis integrates this building both physically and artistically within the landscape. The lodge is built directly into the hillside, creating an appropriate rustic picturesque scene. And Davis uses the slope creatively, extending the second story balcony around three sides of the structure and connecting to the hill, allowing its tenants to reach their second story dormitories without climbing the stairs.<sup>51</sup>

Architecturally, Davis provides interest to the broad east façade by a combination of open work brackets and carved pendants hanging from the roof eaves (figure 5.42). These features soften the façade and add picturesque intricacy to the composition. Although the east elevation appears to contain a bank of seven windows, a railing hides the fact that it actually contains a pair of doors and five windows (figure 5.43). On the narrow south façade of the

---

<sup>51</sup> This is accomplished by a final jog in the balcony on the north side, which is not readily visible from the ground.

building, Davis adds a strongly vertical projecting gabled shed dormer to add picturesque variety. The overall composition is tightly framed between the road and the steeply rising hillside.

## **Conclusion**

Montgomery Place is an extremely varied and rich picturesque composition. This designed landscape, created over a period of more than twenty-five years, showcases a wide range of ideas and references from English landscape gardening. Unlike Davis's other picturesque transformation projects in the Hudson Valley, Montgomery Place was shaped by collaborations of two quite different clients: Louise Livingston and the Bartons. In this project, Davis learned how to successfully use Classical language to express picturesque goals in his additions and embellishments to the mansion. The surrounding grounds offered him more freedom to explore new forms and create new landscape scenes in the picturesque mode he was familiar with. During the 1860s, Davis was given the opportunity to revisit his own work. His design solutions show the mature development of his understanding of the English landscape gardening tradition. Here he attempts to create a synthesis not only in architectural terms but in conceptual ones as well, consciously choosing architectural forms that reference the history of the tradition. Fittingly, Davis's last created design at Montgomery Place, the Swiss Cottage, harks back to the time of his early career when he first encountered the romantic architectural productions of the English picturesque movement.

Figure 5.1



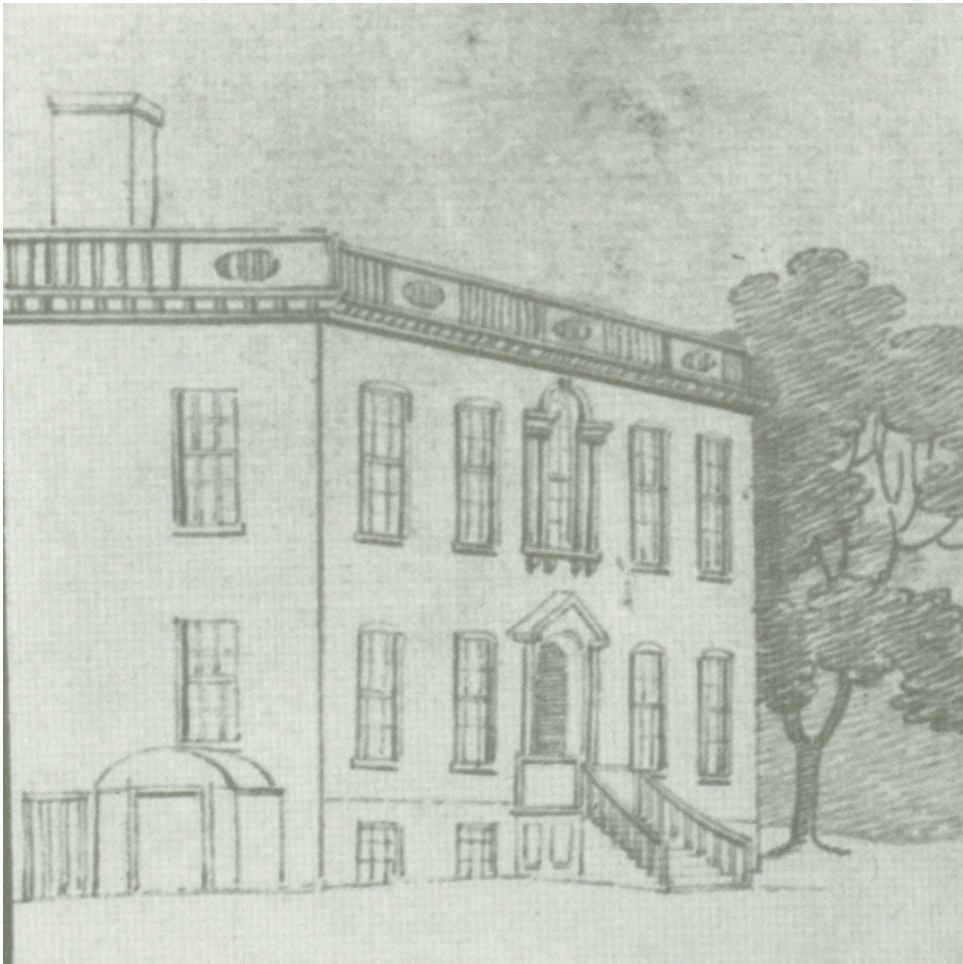
Theobald Chartran (attributed). Portrait of Louise Davezac Livingston , circa 1872. Historic Hudson Valley.

Figure 5.2



Jacques Guillaume L. Amans. Portrait of Cora Livingston Barton, circa 1840. Historic Hudson Valley.  
Unidentified Artist. Minature Portrait of Thomas Pennant Barton, circa 1840. Trustees of the Boston Public Library

Figure 5.3



Alexander Robertson. Drawing of Clermont (detail), circa 1796. N-YHS.

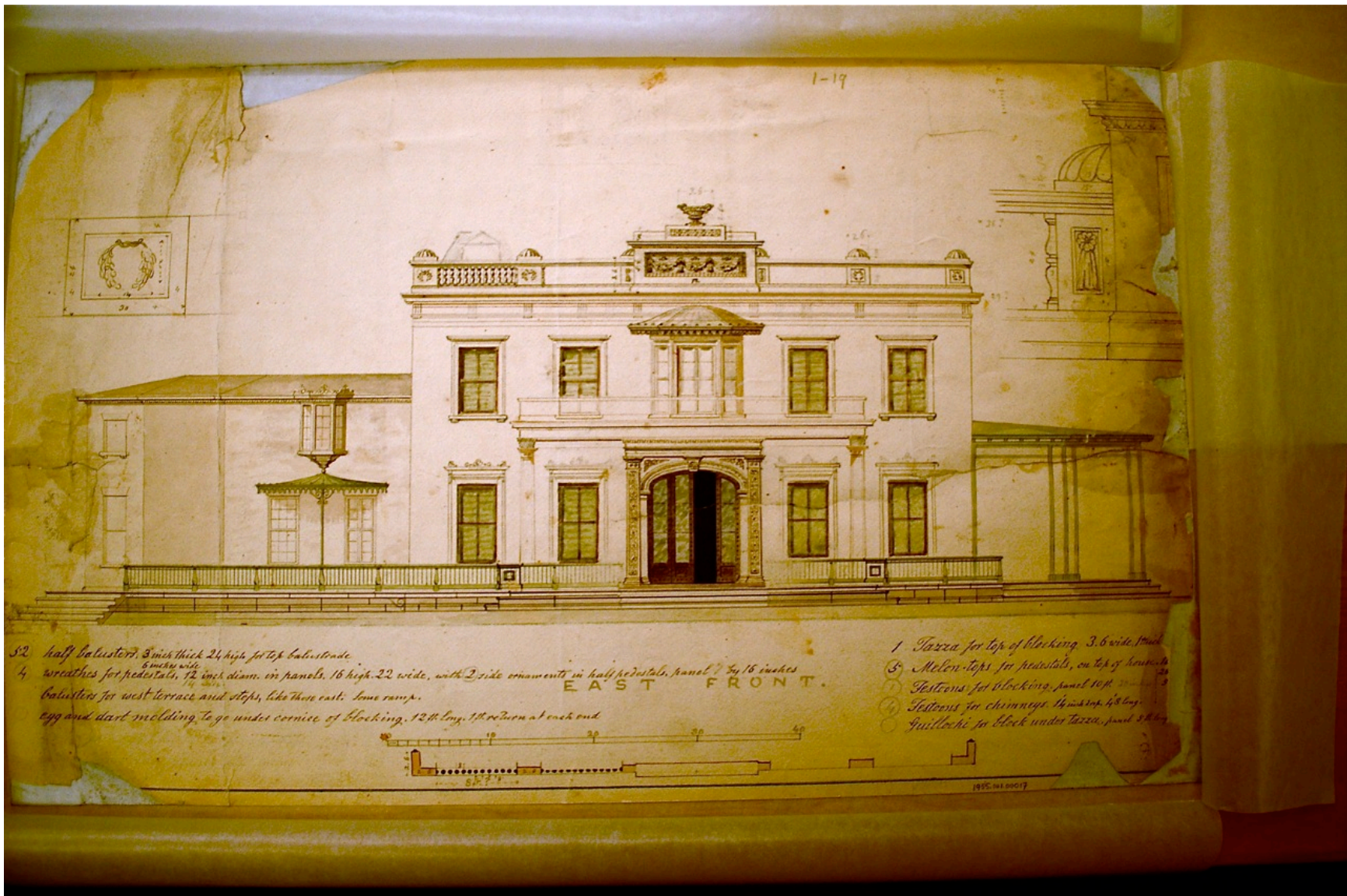


Figure 5.4



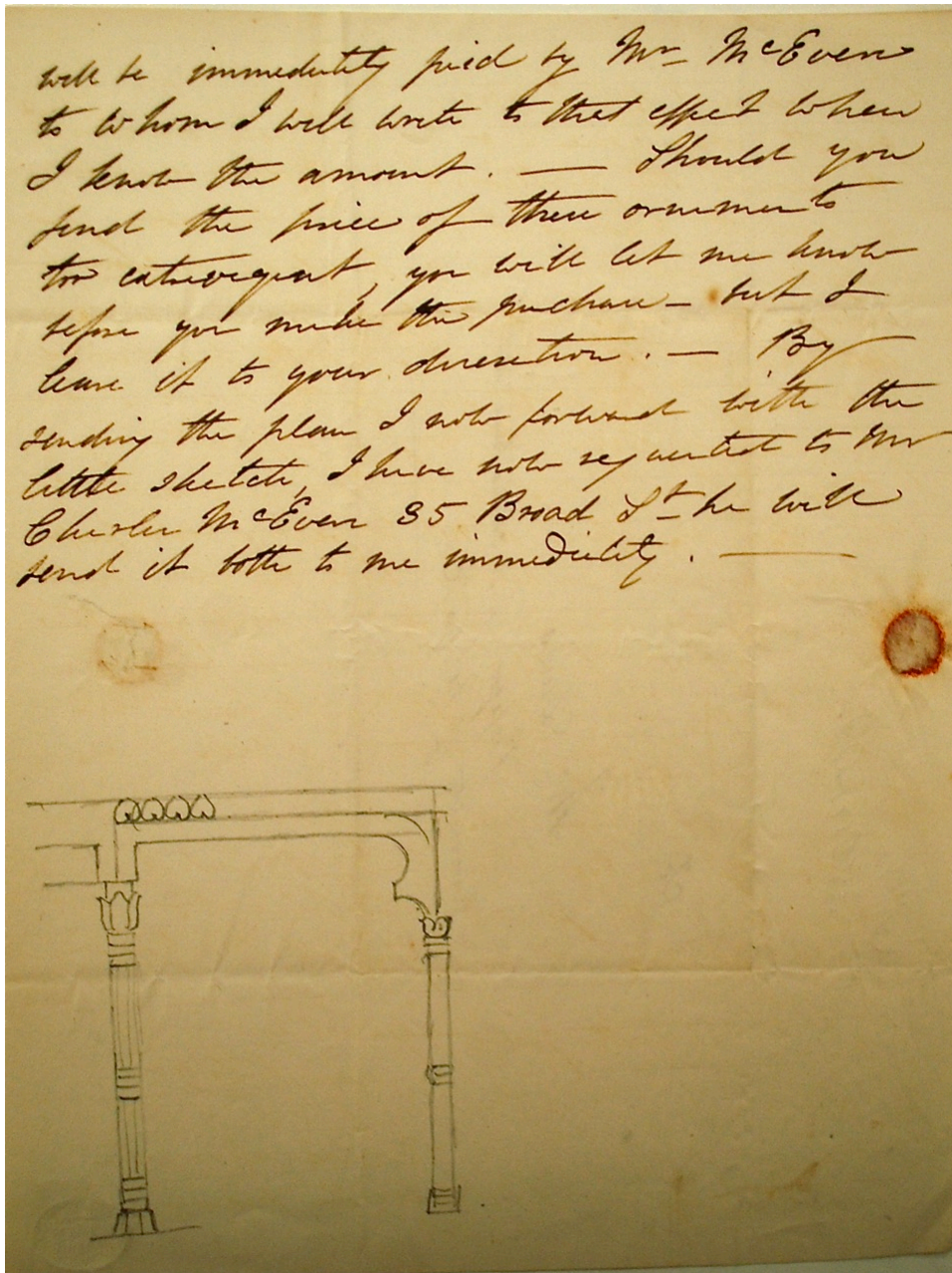
A.J. Davis. Sketch of West elevation of Montgomery Place (pre-transformation). Avery (NYDA 1955.001.00201).

Figure 5.5



A.J. Davis. Ink and watercolor drawing of east elevation of Montgomery Place, circa 1841 and 1860s? Avery (NYDA.1955.001.00017).

Figure 5.6



Louise Livingston. Letter dated May 26 [1842?] with sketch of alternate design for North Pavilion colonnade. Avery.

Figure 5.7



Montgomery Place East Elevation, Winter 2012. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.8



Details of South Wing (left) and North Pavilion (right) architectural treatment. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.9



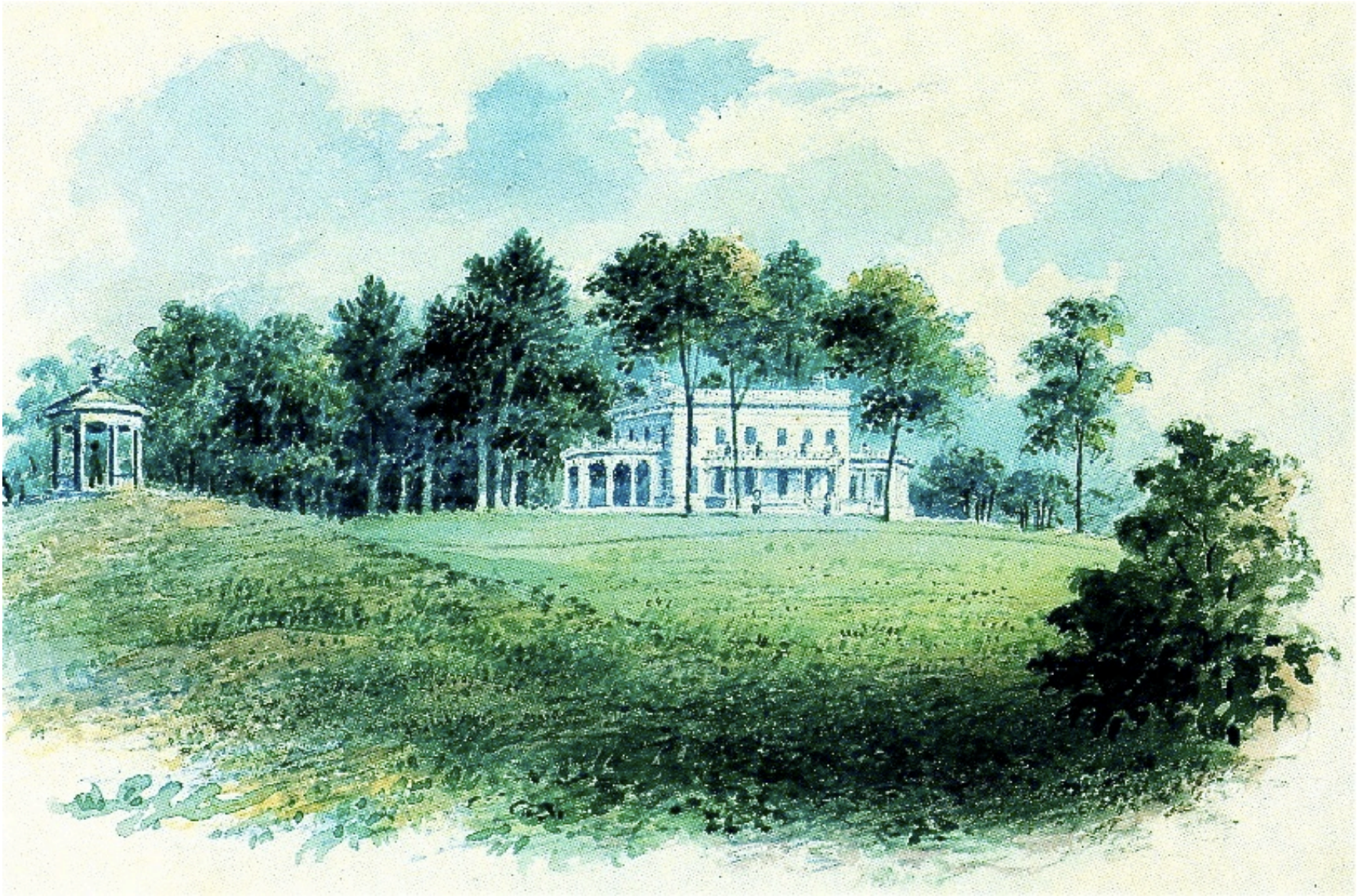
Detail of south wing blind arch. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.10



View showing differential treatment of first and second floor windows. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.11



A.J. Davis. View of West Elevation of Montgomery Place from lawn, circa 1847. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.



Figure 5.12



View from north pavilion looking toward the Hudson River. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.13



A.J. Davis. Watercolor view of Montgomery Place North Pavillion, circa 1847. Avery (NYDA.1940.001.00012).

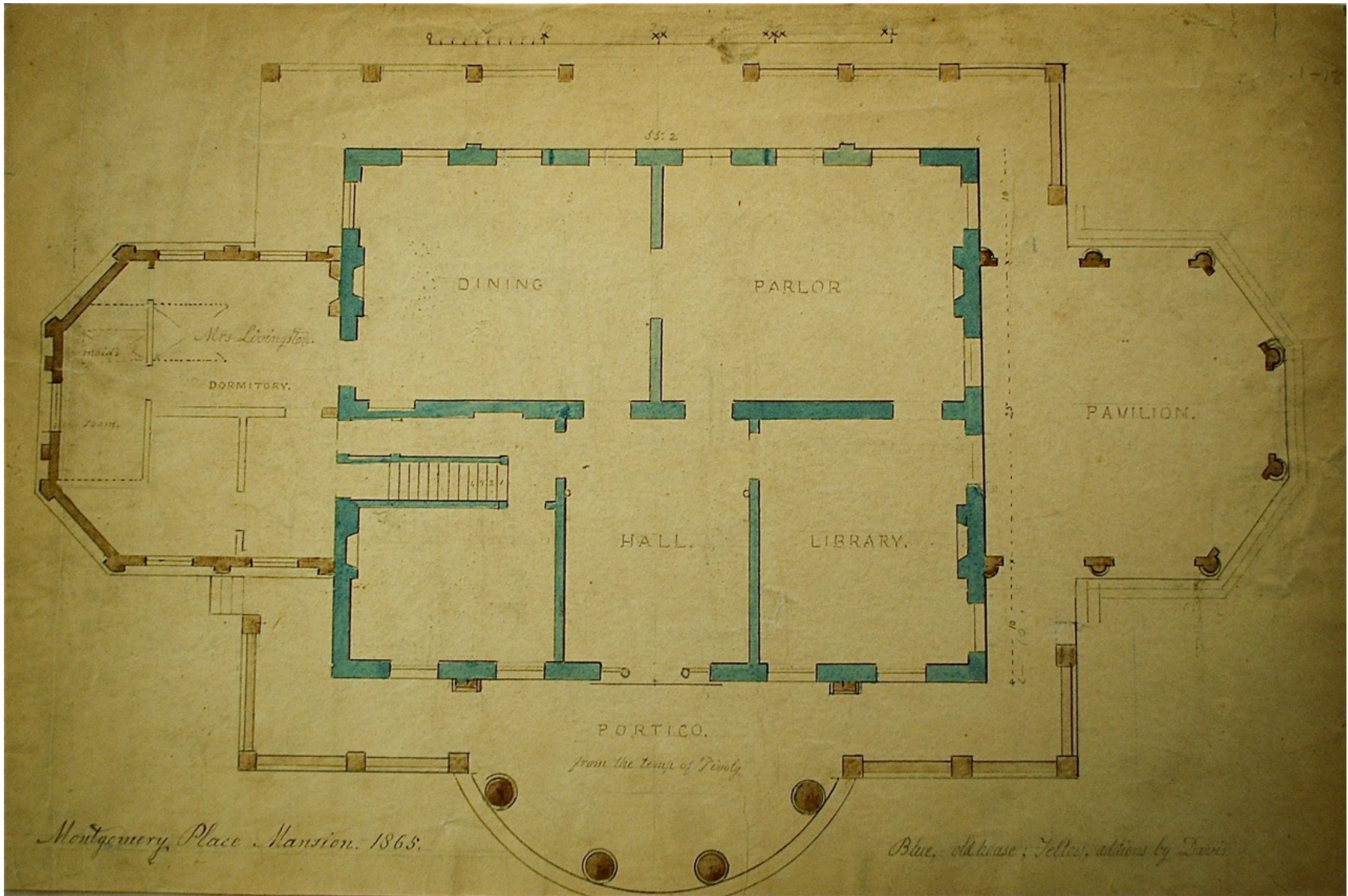
Figure 5.14



PAVILLION & GREEN HOUSE FOR A GOTHIC MANSION.

Humphry Repton. Design for "Pavillion & Green House for a Gothic Mansion" from *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803).

Figure 5.15



A.J. Davis. Ground floor plan showing "old house" (blue) and "additions by Davis" (yellow). Dated 1865. Avery (NYDA.1955.001.00016).

Figure 5.16



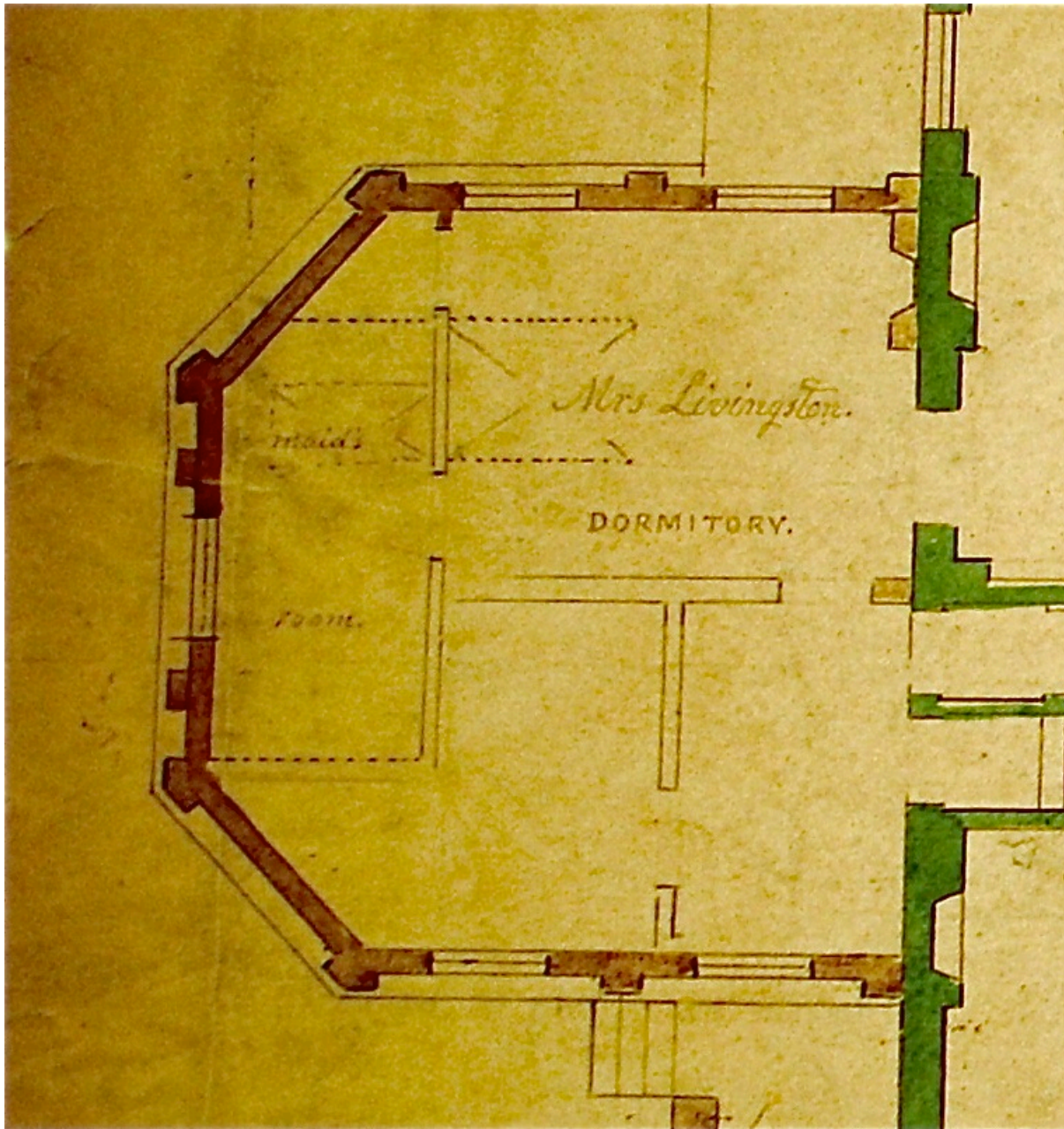
Humphry Repton. Fence Near the House from *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803).

Figure 5.17



Terrace with balustrade, north east corner of house. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.18



A.J. Davis. Detail of south wing floor plan from drawing dated 1865. Avery (NYDA.1955.001.00016).

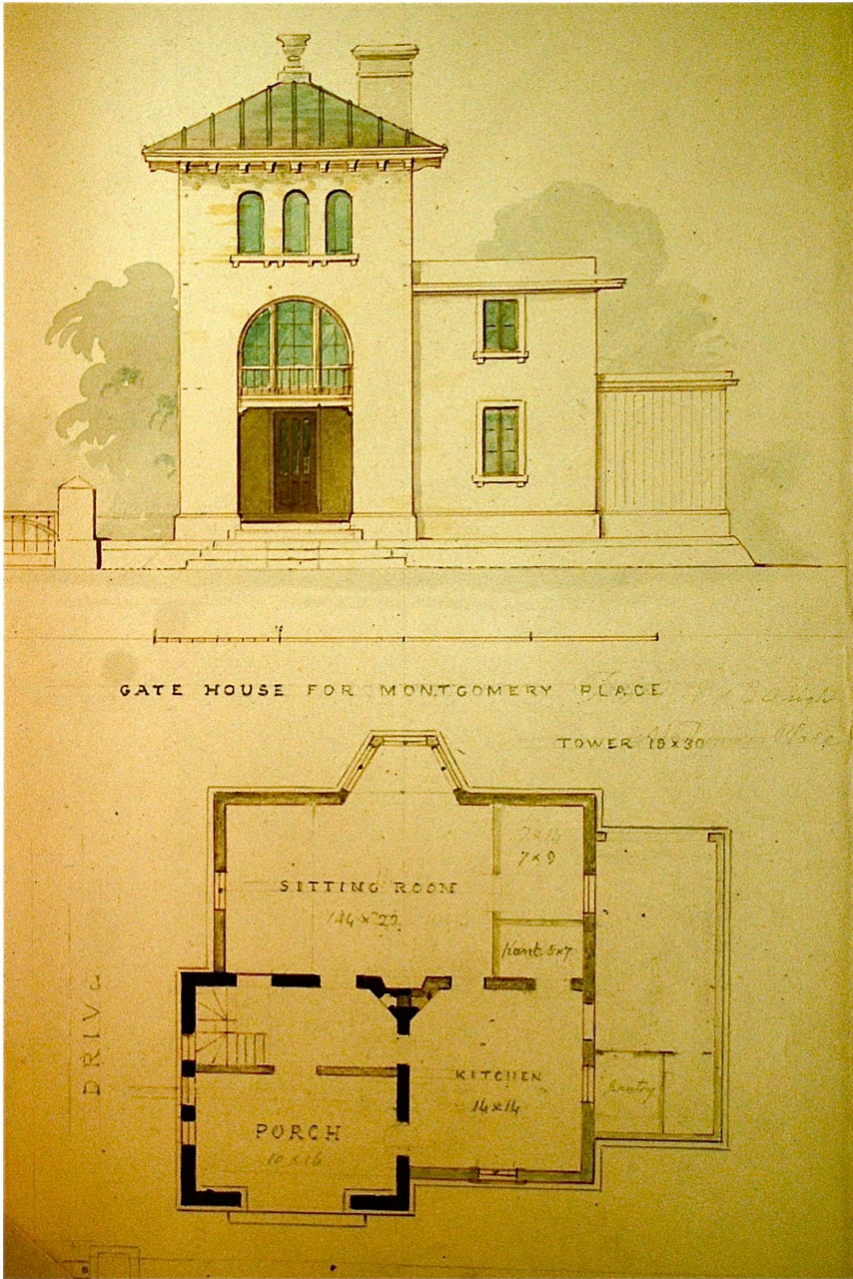
Figure 5.19



A.J. Davis. Pencil sketch of conservatory at Montgomery Place, circa 1847. Avery (NYDA.1940.001.00005).

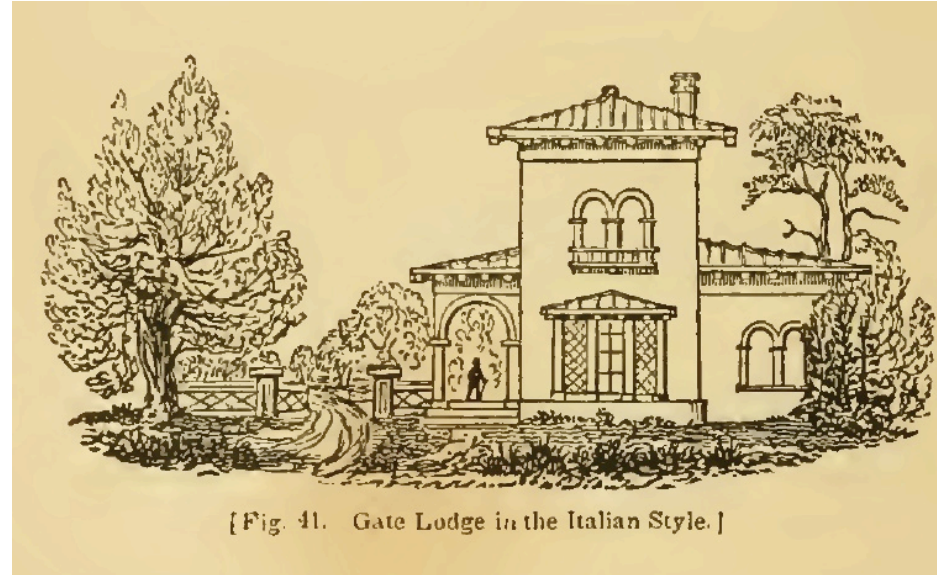


Figure 5.20



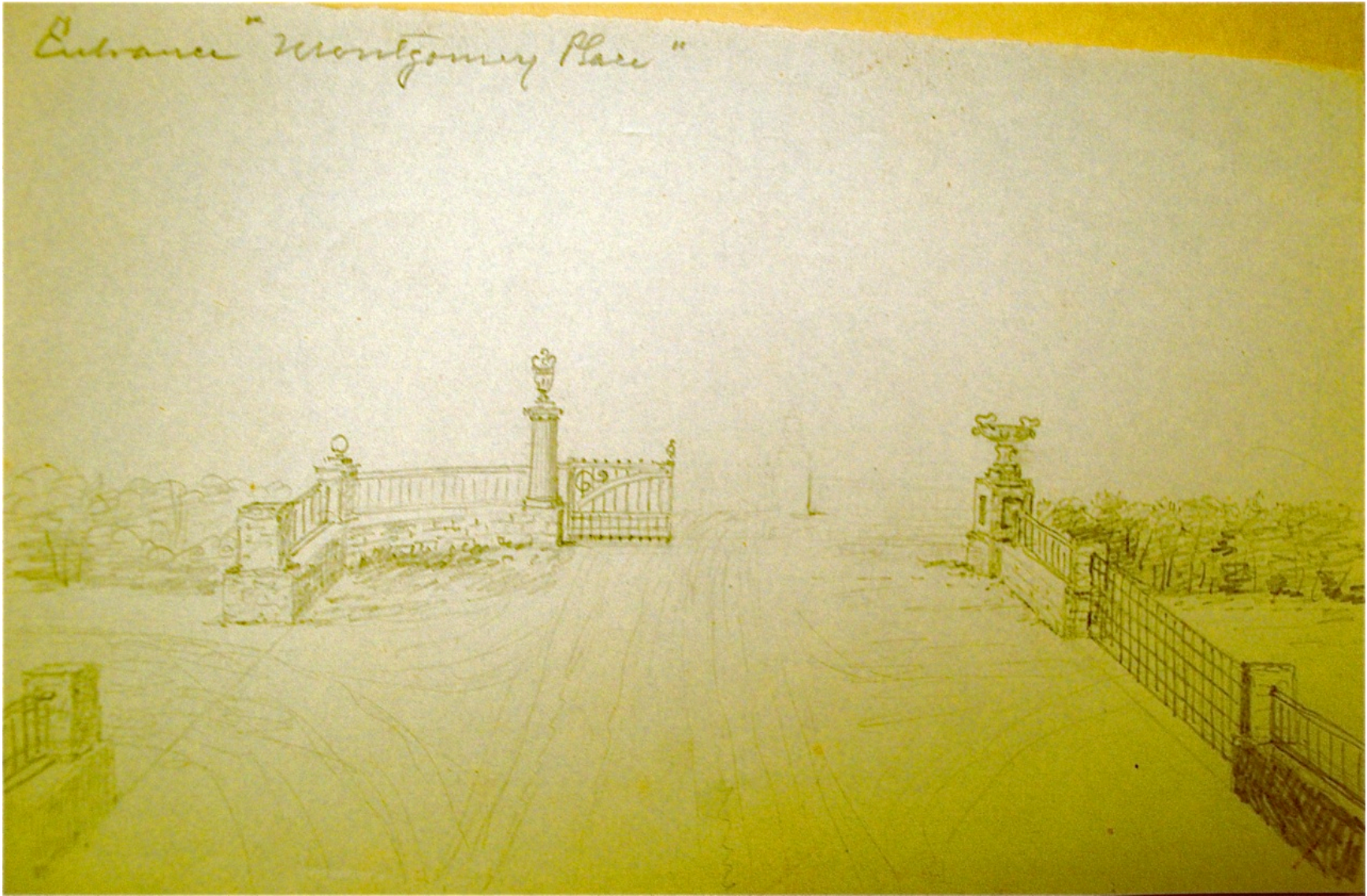
A.J. Davis. Design for an Italianate Entrance Lodge (unexecuted), circa 1845. MMA (Scrapbook VI, 24.66.1405).

Figure 5.21



A.J. Davis. Drawing of "Gate Lodge in the Italian Style" from A.J. Downing, *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841).

Figure 5.22



A.J. Davis. Drawing of Entrance of Montgomery Place, circa 1846. Avery (NYDA.1955.001.00013).

Figure 5.23



A.J. Davis. Design for Chinese Bridge (executed?) (circa 1846-47). Avery (NYDA.1940.001.000115).

Figure 5.24

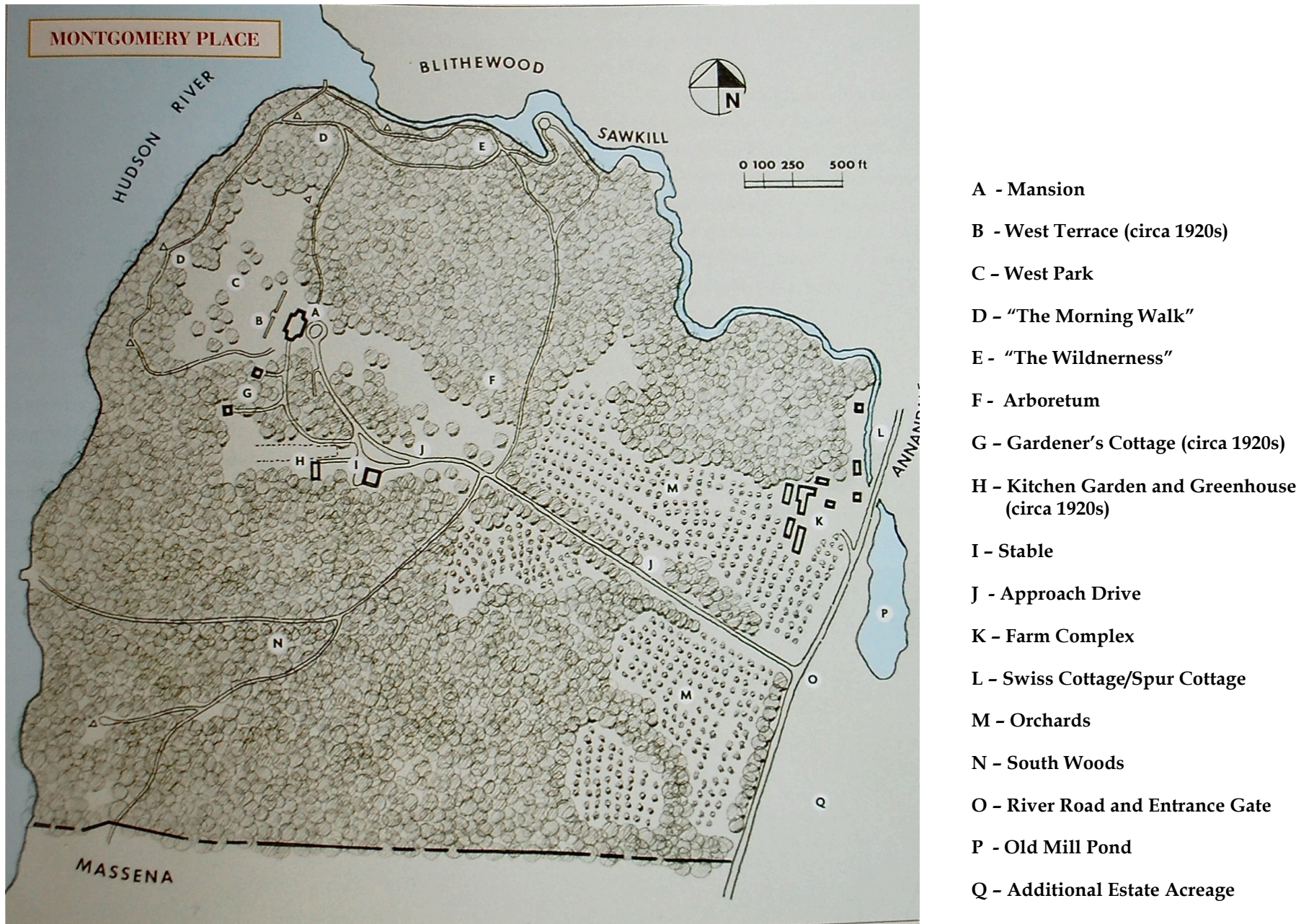


A RUSTIC BRIDGE.

PLATE I. LACEYMAN'S REPORT OF ART, IN 1823.

J. B. Papworth. "Design for a Rustic Bridge" from *Hints on Ornamental Gardening* (1823).

Figure 5.25



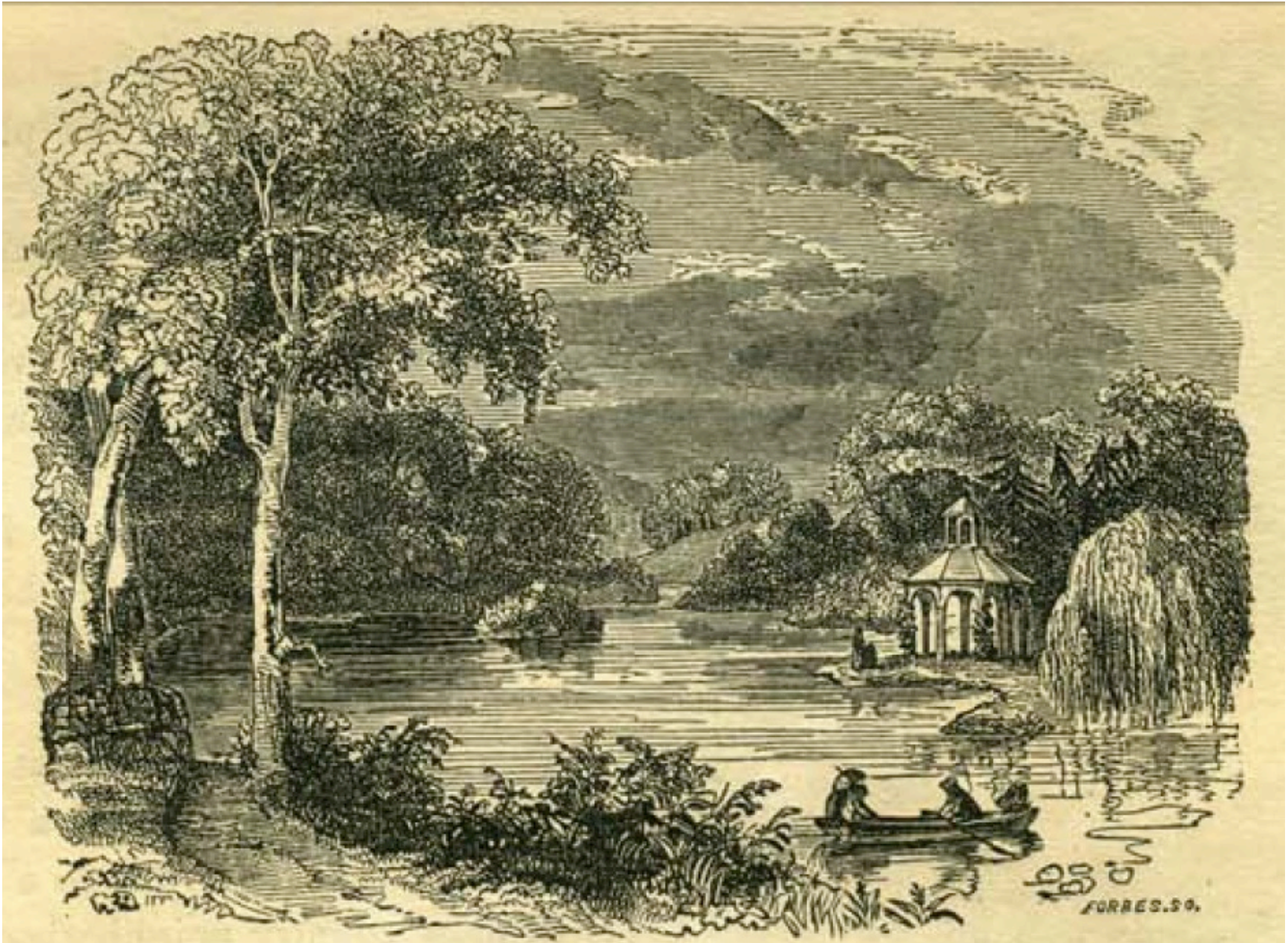
Robert Toole. Reconstructed site plan of Montgomery Place, circa late 1840s from *Landscape Gardens on the Hudson, a History*.

Figure 5.26



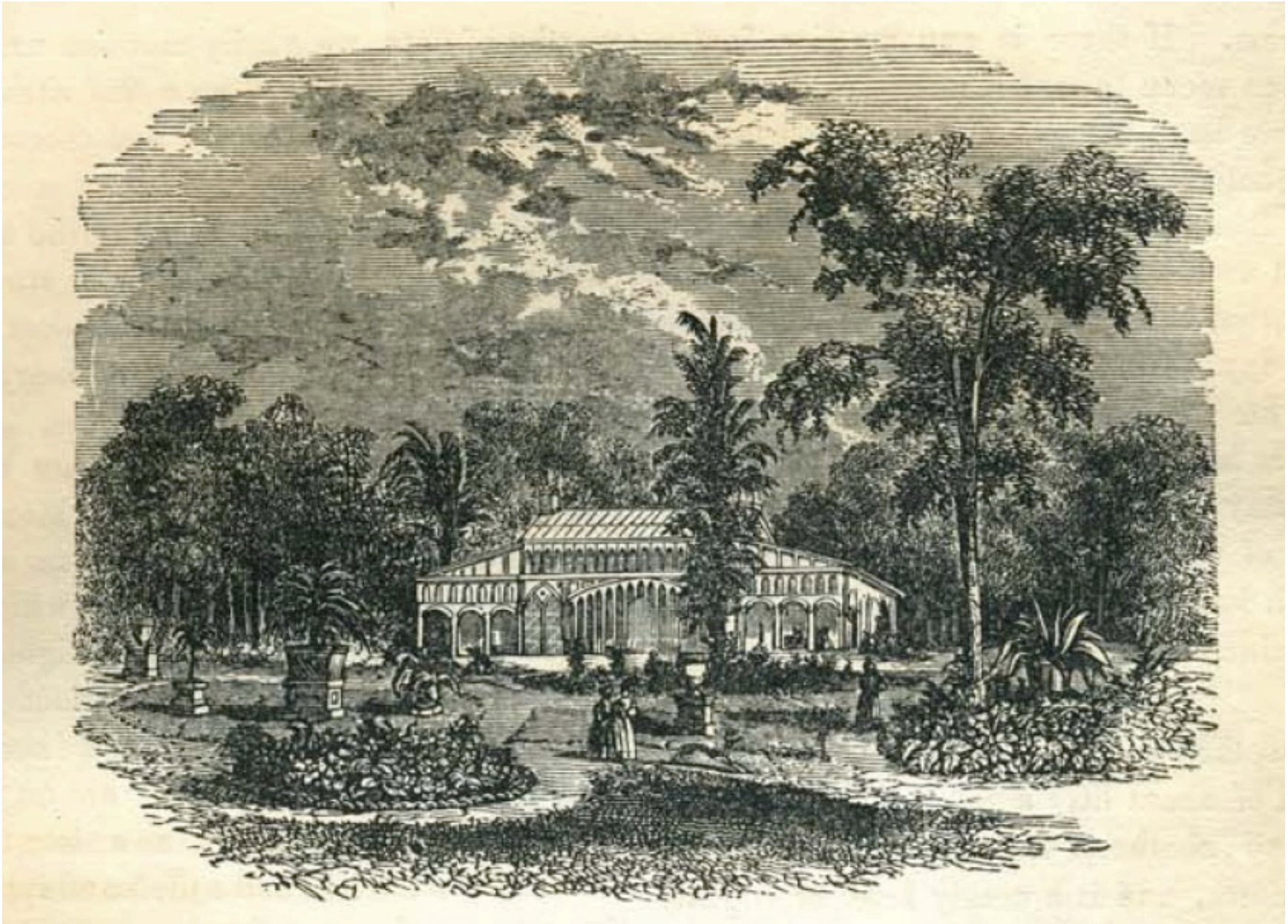
A.J. Davis. Rustic Shelter from "A Visit to Montgomery Place," *The Horticulturalist*, October, 1847.

Figure 5.27



A.J. Davis. View of the Lake with Pavilion from "A Visit to Montgomery Place," *The Horticulturalist*, October 1847.

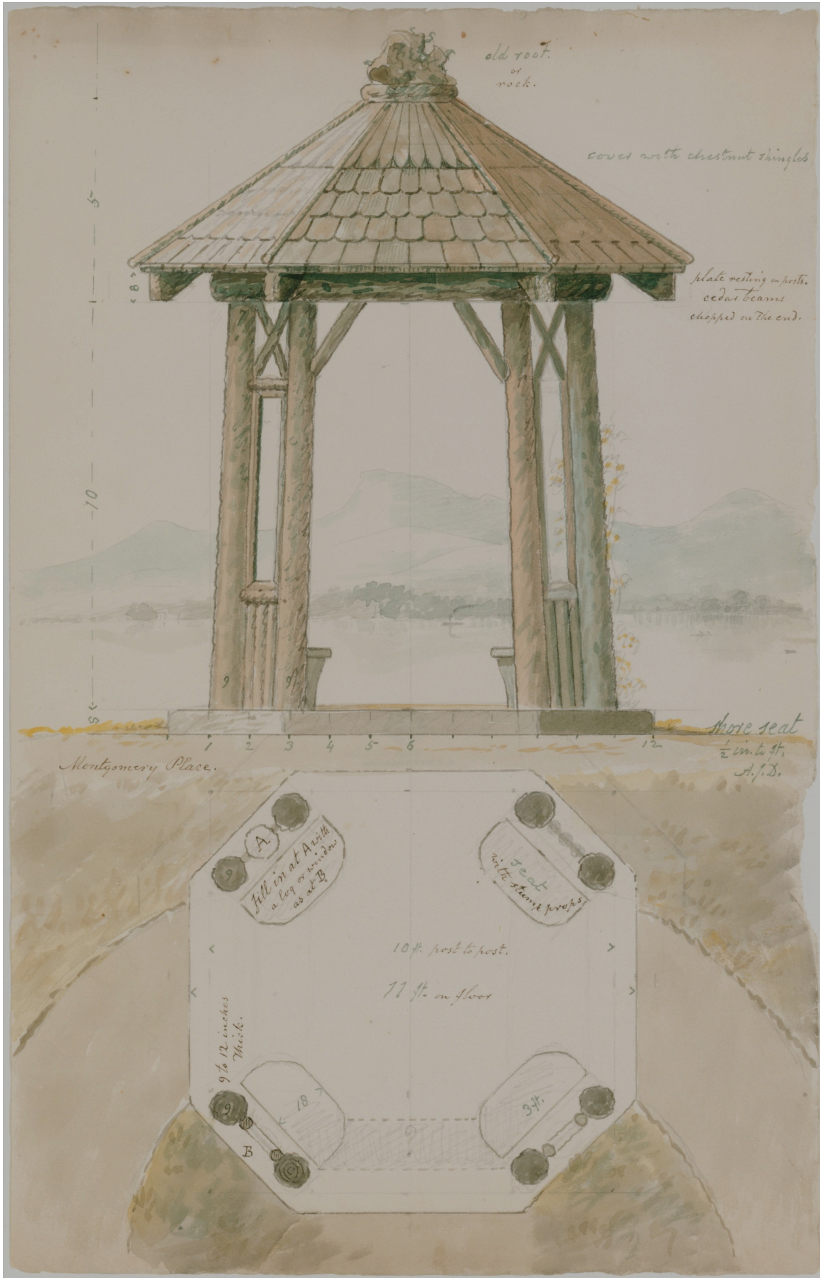
Figure 5.28



A.J. Davis. View of the conservatory with flower garden designed by A.J. Downing from "A Visit to Montgomery Place," *The Horticulturalist*, October 1847.



Figure 5.29



A.J. Davis. Design for a Rustic Shore Seat, Montgomery Place. MMA (24.66.1052).

Figure 5.30



A.J. Davis. Carriage Barn. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.31



View of board and batten farmhouse on eastern edge of property. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.32



View of new East front portico. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.33



William Kent. Temple of Ancient Virtue, Stowe, circa 1738. Photo: Wikipedia.

Figure 5.34



Claude Lorraine. Apollo and the Muses on Mount Helion (Parnassus), circa 1680. Image: Wikipedia.

Figure 5.35



View of East front blocking and balustrade. Photo: Peter Watson.

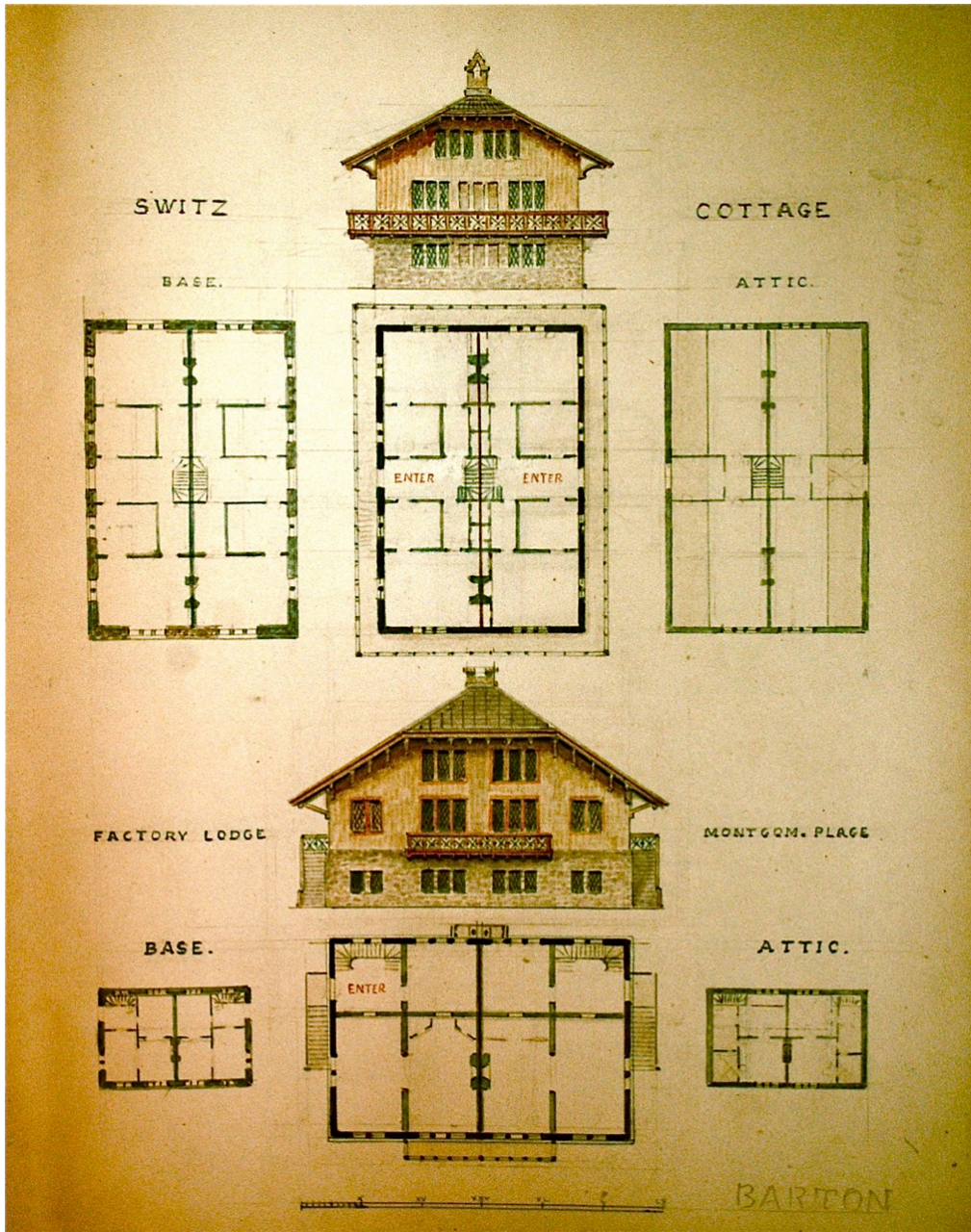
Figure 5.36



Sir William Chambers. Casino at Marino, Dublin, Ireland, circa 1758-75. Photo: Wikipedia.



Figure 5.37



A.J. Davis. Two designs for Swiss Cottages, circa 1860s? MMA (24.66.1406(52)).

Figure 5.38



View of the Swiss Cottage from the southeast. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.39



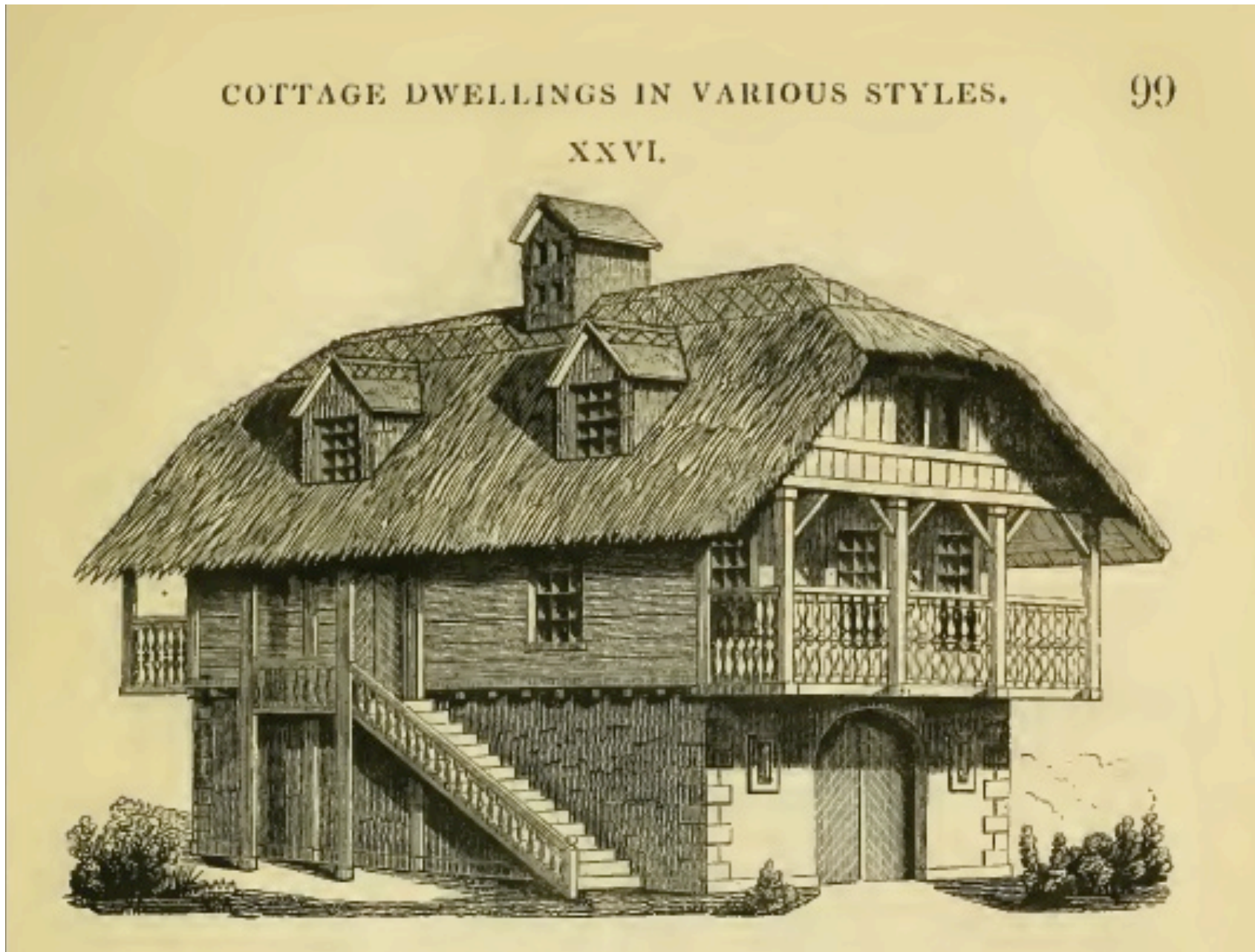
John Nash. Swiss Cottage at Tipperary, circa 1812. Photo: Wikipedia.

Figure 5.40



P.F. Robinson. Design for a Swiss Cottage (No. 8) from *Rural Architecture* (

Figure 5.41



J.C. Loudon. Design for a German-Swiss Cottage from *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture* (1839).

Figure 5.42



Detail of openwork brackets and ornamental drops on east elevation. Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 5.43



Detail of east elevation showing pair of doors in central window bank above balcony. Photo: Peter Watson.

**Chapter 6**  
**Picturesque Transformations:**  
**Locust Grove (1851-52)**



## Overview

Locust Grove is a Hudson River estate located two miles south of the city of Poughkeepsie, in Dutchess County, New York. The property was originally part of a 385-acre working farm owned by Henry Livingston, Jr. (1748-1828).<sup>1</sup>

Livingston built a two-story, Anglo-Dutch stone farmhouse and frame barns near the Albany Post Road (present day Route 9) during the 1770s.<sup>2</sup> He also appears to have planted the Black Locust trees (*Robinia Pseudoacacia*) on either side of the drive that gave the name to the property. In 1830, Livingston sold the house and 250 acres of land to John B. Montgomery (1785-1861), a former New York City merchant. John Montgomery and his wife Isabella built a new Federal-style, two

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry Livingston, Jr. had inherited the property from his father Henry Livingston, Sr. (1714-1799), who had assembled it from various tracts purchased from the widow and heirs of Henry Vandenburg (circa 1680-1750).

<sup>2</sup> This house may have incorporated portions of an earlier farmhouse on the site during the Vandenburg ownership.



and a half story, center-hall brick house further away from the road, on the bluff overlooking the Hudson River. While the Montgomerys kept the original stone farmhouse intact, they moved the barns and farming operations to the land below the bluff, beginning the process of turning the working farm into a gentleman's estate. In 1847, the Montgomerys sold the two houses and 100 acres of land to the painter and inventor Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872). Between 1850-51, Morse completed a series of land transactions that consolidated the existing lands into a 76-acre estate.<sup>3</sup> In 1851, after completing various sketches of potential house redesigns, Morse contacted his old acquaintance A.J. Davis to help him update the main Federal-style house, which Morse claimed, "had no pretensions to taste."<sup>4</sup> Morse and Davis collaborated closely on the new design; a process documented in a unique series of pencil sketches in both Morse's and Davis's hand. The final design consisted of a new four-story Italianate tower on the river (west) elevation, a two-story porte-cochère addition on the east elevation and semi-octagonal bays on the gable ends of the house. A single-story trellised veranda was also wrapped around the south bay. Unlike his other Hudson River projects, Davis did not participate in the landscape gardening beyond the initial house redesign, completed in the spring of 1852. Locust Grove stayed in the Morse family until 1895 when it was sold to William (1855-1909) and Martha (1856-1946) Young, who added a new dining room on the north side of the house and planted new flower gardens. During the 1960s, the Young's daughter, Annette Innis Young (1885-1975), began the process of converting the property into a museum, securing a National Historic Landmark designation

---

<sup>3</sup> Morse purchased 19 acres of woodland on the south border of the property in 1850 and sold 43 acres of open farmland on the northern border in 1851 leaving a 76-acre estate. Both transactions were made with landscape design goals in mind and a de-emphasis of farming. Robert M. Toole, "The 'Prophetic Eye of Taste:' Samuel F.B. Morse at Locust Grove " in *America's First River: history and culture of the Hudson River Valley* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 192.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

in 1964, and setting up a non-profit organization to administer the site following her death. Locust Grove Estate now operates the property as a historic house museum. The house and grounds are interpreted to the period of the early twentieth century residency of the Youngs. While features from the Morse-era landscape still exist, the primary view-shed to the Hudson river which defined his design has been largely closed in by second growth trees.

### **Historical Background**

Samuel Finley Breese Morse grew up in Charleston, Massachusetts, in a family that strongly believed in the importance of education (figure 6.1). His father, Jedidiah (1761-1826) was a pastor who also was a noted geographer. Samuel F.B. Morse, who was called “Finley” by his friends and family, was sent to Phillips Academy at Andover, Massachusetts, at the age of seven, and graduated from Yale in 1810, where he studied religious philosophy and mathematics. As a young man, however, Samuel Morse (figure 6.2) dreamed of being an artist, and painted portraits of his friends throughout his college years. In 1811, he convinced his parents to allow him to travel to England with his teacher, the prominent American artist Washington Allston (1779-1843), to study with Benjamin West at the Royal Academy in London. Morse’s association with both artists was formative. Allston was an early pioneer of the Romantic landscape painting that was later to coalesce into the Hudson River School.<sup>5</sup> It is probably through Allston and his circle that Morse learned of the English Picturesque and

---

<sup>5</sup> On his first trip to Europe (1801-1808) Allston also studied in London with Benjamin West, and traveled to Italy and France. In Paris, Allston met Washington Irving who became a lifelong friend and connected him to the Romantic currents later established in the Hudson Valley. In later years, Allston penned a Gothic novel *Monaldi* (1841), continuing the Romantic tradition established by landscape gardener and gothic novel author Horace Walpole.

landscape gardening.<sup>6</sup> Allston's work shows the strong stamp of the key landscape painters who inspired the English picturesque including both Salvator Rosa (figure 6.3) and Claude Lorrain (figure 6.4).

On the other hand, Benjamin West, an American expatriate originally from Pennsylvania, was the foremost history painter of his generation, and as President of the Royal Academy, West created the educational models that Morse would later copy at the National Academy of Design.<sup>7</sup> Under Allston's tutelage, Morse was admitted as an associate of the Royal Academy and later had a major success when his painting of the Dying Hercules (1813) received an honorable mention at the Annual Exhibition, and a related sculpture received first prize from the Adelphi Society.

Evaluated in the overall context of Morse's personality and career, the role model of Benjamin West with its promise of glory as a history painter and institutional power, was perhaps stronger than the proto-Romanticism of Allston. However, Morse was by no means insensitive to Romanticism and to the charms of landscape, and this early exposure manifested itself at various times in his life; in his time in Italy, during his early tenure at New York University, and especially, at Locust Grove.

---

<sup>6</sup> As a student on a fixed budget, however, Morse had little opportunity to travel around the English countryside.

<sup>7</sup> Morse's initial experience to England also provided him with an intellectual model in which art and science, for a brief moment during the Romantic period, were closely defined. As a student at the Royal Academy, Morse was able to attend scientific lectures at the Royal Society, which were both housed in Somerset House, (designed by Sir William Chambers in 1779) in the Strand, along with the Society of Antiquaries and the Naval Board. At the time of Morse's attendance, the Royal Academy offered an Antique School (drawing from sculpture casts), and a School of Live Models. In 1826, when Morse first formed the National Academy of Design, the organization was only able to afford setting up an Antique School. A.J. Davis was included in the first roster of students of the Antique School.

Returning to America in 1815, twenty-four year old Morse wanted to pursue a career as a history painter like West, but found he had to support himself as an itinerant portrait painter like fellow American artists of the period. In 1816, Morse met his first wife Lucretia Pickering (1799- 1826) in Concord, New Hampshire on an extended New England painting tour. The couple married in 1818. By 1823, the Morses, after several abortive moves by Finley to establish himself financially, had landed in New York City.<sup>8</sup> By this time the Morses had three children with another on the way. On February 10, 1825, Lucretia Morse died of an illness following childbirth; a fact Morse learned three days later in a letter from his father.<sup>9</sup> Finley sent his children to live with his parents and rented a large townhouse on 20 Canal Street.<sup>10</sup>

To assuage his grief, Morse turned to work and the company of artists. His Canal Street townhouse became the home of a newly formed Drawing Association, and later he threw himself into his new role as President of the National Academy of Design (described in Chapter 1). After several fractious

---

<sup>8</sup> Morse had launched himself into a variety of artistic and scientific ventures including, a new academy of the arts of South Carolina, an application to be the private secretary of the Minister of Mexico, and a marble carving machine invention.

<sup>9</sup> This tragic event and the time lag in receiving the communication is cited in multiple biographies of Morse as prompting his future invention of the telegraph. Morse had been working in Washington D.C. on an important portrait commission of the Marquis de Lafayette.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Silverman in *Lightning Man: The Accursed life of Samuel Morse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), speculates that Morse rented the house with the intent of subleasing part of it to create a substitute family for his daughter Susan who briefly lived with him after his wife's death. Silverman, 74. Morse's own diary provides a somewhat different account: "My new establishment will be very commodious for my professional studies and I don't think, being so far uptown, will, on the whole, be any disadvantage to me." Edward Lind Morse, *Samuel F. B. Morse, His Letters and Journals*, vol. 1 (New York: E.L. Morse, 1914), May 1 1825.

years of struggle with the old American Academy of Design, Morse left for an extended trip to Europe at the end of 1829 to reconnect himself to the art of painting.<sup>11</sup> This trip was partially backed by A.J. Davis's friend and patron Robert Donaldson who commissioned Morse to paint a copy of Raphael's *School of Athens* for his State Street home.<sup>12</sup> While in London in December of 1829, Morse met up with Davis's business partner Ithiel Town (1784-1844), and his friend, the artist Nathaniel Jocelyn (1796-1881), who accompanied Morse on his trip to Italy. The bulk of Morse's two-year trip was spent in Rome, studying and copying paintings both for his own work and for the benefit of his sponsors.

In May of 1830, Morse, Town, and Jocelyn made a memorable side trip to Tivoli, visiting some of the same Renaissance landscape gardens that inspired Lord Burlington and William Kent in the early eighteenth century. In particular, Morse singled out the Villa d'Este for praise, writing in his diary, "among the ancient olive trees and straight avenues of box and cypress, the Villa d' Este and the picturesque cluster of buildings in its vicinity presented a most splendid appearance."<sup>13</sup> He returned at midnight to see the grotto of Neptune by

---

<sup>11</sup> During this period, Davis quickly soured on the National Academy of Design, which despite its claim of supporting all the arts of design (painting, sculpture, architecture and engraving) focused primarily on painting. Davis derisively called the organization the "N.Y. Academy of Painters" and renewed his commitment to the old American Academy, where he was elected a full member in 1832.

<sup>12</sup> Morse raised \$3000 in total from sponsors to fund his European trip. Donaldson pledged \$300 for a copy of the large fresco, which occupies an entire wall in a room in the Vatican. The finished size of Morse's copy is unknown but the painting was hung in both Donaldson's townhouse and later in the Picture Gallery at Blithewood. Jean Bradley Anderson, *Carolinean on the Hudson: The Life of Robert Donaldson* (Raleigh, NC: Historic Preservation Foundation, 1996), 140.

<sup>13</sup> Morse, *Letters and Journals*, May 8, 1830.

moonlight.<sup>14</sup> Morse also made a number of rough sketches of Italian villas (figure 6.5) during this trip that may have influenced his later thinking. Unlike A.J Davis, Morse's knowledge and appreciation of Italian villas was derived from the originals rather than second hand through the mediation of the English picturesque.

### **Morse and Davis at NYU**

In September 1832, Morse returned to America to begin a professorship at the newly founded University of the City of New York (later New York University) in the newly created Department of Design.<sup>15</sup> In 1835, he moved into the new Neo-Gothic building on Washington Square designed by Town, Davis and Dakin (figure 6.6).<sup>16</sup> Morse lived and worked in six rooms located in the northwest tower. In 1836, he painted an unusual allegorical landscape (figure 6.7) that pictured the new university in a sunny classical landscape that mirrored the style of Claude Lorrain, learned from his former teacher Washington Allston.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, May 9, 1830. Morse wrote "went down by moonlight towards the grotto of Neptune, a party was there by torchlight, and the flashing of their lights on the spring and on the rocks, warming up the deep shadows thrown by the pale lights of the moon was exceedingly grand."

<sup>15</sup> Morse had been appointed Professor of Painting and Sculpture while he was still in Europe. In 1835 Morse's title was changed to Professor of the Literature of the Fine Arts; a telling change which signaled his more theoretical inclinations. He maintained this largely ceremonial position until 1872.

<sup>16</sup> Davis had initially proposed a classical design for the new university in 1832 that had been rejected in favor of Town and Dakin's Neo-Gothic design. Davis is credited with designing the soaring Gothic interior of the main chapel facing Washington Square. Francis R. Kowsky, "Simplicity and Dignity: The Public and Institutional Buildings of Alexander Jackson Davis," in *Alexander Jackson Davis: American Architect 1803-1892*, (New York: Rizzoli Intl, 1992), 50.

<sup>17</sup> The architectural subject material of this composition is intriguing. In addition to main NYU building, there are a number of other (unidentified) structures in the composition. Most scholars see this painting in terms of the dawn (literally)

Sometime during these years, Morse also reconnected with his former student A.J. Davis who had just started his own independent architecture practice. By 1838, Davis had also moved his offices to the NYU building, which he retained until 1842.<sup>18</sup>

### **Rural Residences Frontispiece**

In 1836, Morse painted a small oil landscape (figure 6.8) that was used for the frontispiece of Davis's *Rural Residences* (1837). A close-up of the engraved version (figure 6.9) of this scene is revealing. The Gothic castle, backed by woods is set in a carefully composed landscape containing various types of trees, and two different ornamental bridges crossing a winding river. Both the castle and the landscape are unmistakable products of and references to English landscape gardening by Morse and Davis. The residence, with its large plate glass windows and deliberately irregular "sky outline" is clearly a faux Gothic castle in a landscape garden of the type made popular by Humphry Repton and his sometimes partner architect John Nash (figure 6.10).

---

of a new era of the arts in which America will lead Europe. But could the invigorating experience of living and working in a new architectural creation have convinced Morse of the validity of Davis's steady conviction that architecture should lead this new future of the arts? Unfortunately, very little survives to document Davis and Morse's interactions during this period. Morse, as always, was also involved in a thousand other projects including his questionable involvement in the Native American (anti-immigrant) Party, an unsuccessful bid as mayor of New York, and other, equally unsuccessful attempts to obtain large Federal painting commissions.

<sup>18</sup> Davis returned his architectural office to the Merchant's Exchange in 1842 with the short-lived resumption of his partnership with Ithiel Town. His principal offices remained at 93 Merchant's Exchange until 1862 when he leased office space again in NYU until his retirement in 1873. Throughout most of this period, however, Davis appeared to have retained a secondary "library/collection" at NYU.

But this intellectual closeness between Morse and Davis was not to last. 1837 was a pivotal year in both men's careers. For Davis, it marked the beginning of his career transforming the architecture and landscape of estates in the Hudson Valley in the tradition of English landscape gardening. For Morse, 1837 marked the end of his career as a painter, and his full time commitment to the invention and commercialization of the telegraph that would consume him for the next fifteen years. Only in 1851 would the two men resume their conversation on landscape gardening in the development of Locust Grove.

### **Locust Grove: Original Structures**

In August of 1847, Morse's finances felt secure enough for him to purchase a permanent home after many years of living in rented quarters with his two now-grown sons. He excitedly wrote his brother Sidney, a Washington-based lawyer, about his new purchase: "I am afraid to tell you of its beauties and advantage. It is such a place as in England could not be purchased for the double the number of pounds sterling. Its 'capabilities,' as the landscape gardeners would say, are unequalled. There is every variety of surface, plain, hill, dale, glen, running stream and fine forests, and ever variety of distant prospect."<sup>19</sup> Morse's letter shows he had not abandoned his interest in landscape gardening despite the intervening years of unrelenting work securing his invention.

Morse paid John Montgomery \$17,500 for a 100-acre parcel which included three existing houses: Henry Livingston, Jr.'s original eighteenth-century Anglo-Dutch stone farm house, the Montgomery's 1830 brick Federal style house, and a second vernacular farm house that had been constructed by the Montgomerys near the river front.

---

<sup>19</sup> SFB Morse letter to Sidney Morse dated October 12, 1847, quoted in Toole, 191.



A detail from a later engraving (figure 6.11) provides a glimpse of Livingston's original stone farmhouse, as seen from a vantage point slightly north of the main house and close to the Post Road. This vignette captures several layers of landscape history. During the 1770s, Henry Livingston, Jr. sited the gable end of his two-story stone farmhouse toward the main road and planted a belt of locust trees (visible to the left of the house) along the service road leading down to riverfront.<sup>20</sup> Originally, several barns and outbuildings were also located close to the house consistent with the working character of this landscape. When the Montgomerys arrived in 1830, they retained the farmhouse but relocated the barn complex to the riverfront where they built a second farmhouse (now destroyed) for the farm workers. The barnyard around the old house was then cleaned up and replanted first by the Montgomerys and enhanced by Morse. The Montgomerys also redeveloped the area beyond the original farmhouse (behind the row of trees to the right of the house) into an informal park planted with sugar maple trees. The original entrance drive was then linked to a new carriage loop drive that ran through the middle of this park and terminated at the steps of the Montgomery's new Federal-style house. They also added a two-story carriage barn with a hip roof northwest of the house.<sup>21</sup> When Morse arrived in

---

<sup>20</sup> These plantings likely triggered the naming of the property "Locust Grove." When he purchased the estate in 1851, Morse named his new home in honor of these trees, discovering after the fact that this was the original place name. He wrote his brother Sidney "Locust Grove it seems was the original name given to this place by Judge Livingston, and without knowing this fact I had given the same name to it, so that there is a natural appropriateness to the name of my house." Morse, quoted in Toole, 191.

<sup>21</sup> There is some confusion over the dating this structure that still exists on the property in a somewhat modified form. Some accounts suggest the stable was built by Morse in the 1850s but this is not documented in his correspondence. Stylistically, with its six-over-six windows and shallow hip roof, it clearly belongs to the Federal taste of the Montgomerys. It does not make sense that Morse would have gone to the trouble of transforming the main house into an Italianate villa and then build an old-fashioned Federal-style stable in plain view of the house. Much more probably, he simply added new green houses onto the

1847, he retained this basic arrangement, restoring the original farmhouse for agrarian worker use and as monument the history of place, which he valued.

Several sketches by Morse document the appearance and floor plan of the Montgomery's two-and a half story brick federal house (figure 6.12) when he purchased it in 1847. The design of this circa 1830 house was very conservative, reflecting the prevailing Federal taste of twenty-five years before rather than the up to date Greek Revival country houses being designed by Town & Davis during this same period. The east façade was organized into a conventional five-bay design with an entry portico supported by four columns above a wide flight of stairs. This composition was repeated on the west elevation. A pair of internal chimneys framed the gable ends of the house. Gable fenestration was minimal consisting of an attic fanlight and a single second story window. Overall, this design did not make much use of the expansive river prospects of the site. Internally, the house was also conventionally arranged around a center hall with a pair of parlors on the left-hand side of the house and a single large dining room on the right with a small stair hall behind it.

### **Improvements (1847-51)**

From the time of his initial purchase, Morse was interested in the gradual improvement of Locust Grove "as means and inclinations dictates."<sup>22</sup> Two months after he acquired the property, Morse wrote his brother Sidney on October 12, 1847: "Should you chance upon any practical works on Landscape Gardening, with numerous designs, you may get it for me. I have Loudon and

---

east side of this already existing structure during the 1850s. Both structures are clearly visible in a period engraving discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>22</sup> Toole, 191.

Whately already.”<sup>23</sup> In 1848, Morse added an ornamental pond on the land below the bluff creating a glimmering sheet seen from the lawn above. He was also active reshaping the plantation of trees on the property. Again in a letter to his brother, he wrote that he had been “selecting and marking carefully those trees which were to be removed and charging not to cut a single twig that I had not selected and marked. The shade of the trees was calculated and essential for my purpose.”<sup>24</sup>

In 1848, Samuel Morse made another important move that shaped the future of Locust Grove: he re-married. At the age of fifty-eight, the long widowed Morse married Sarah Griswold and started a new family. He would eventually have four more children. This inevitably produced a demand to remodel and modernize the old Federal style house at Locust Grove.

Initially, however, Morse’s finances were not in shape to do this. While the telegraph was universally acknowledged as a prodigiously important invention, Morse was still involved in the struggle to uphold his patent of 1840 and fight off the swarming “pirates” who threatened to steal away the profits from building competing telegraph lines. His voluminous letters from these years, document the extensive legal and political battles that he and his associates waged to protect his invention rights and secure his future. Morse was no gentleman of leisure during the period he transformed Locust Grove with A.J. Davis. By the spring of 1851, having secured some important patent victories, Morse felt sufficiently confident to contact his old friend and office mate forty-eight year old A.J. Davis about transforming the house.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 192.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

## Enter Davis

Davis made his first visit to Locust Grove on April 23, 1851. He wrote in his Day Book : “Went to Pokeepsie to visit Professor Morse and remained 3 days (Mon-Wed) examining the country, house, and lands. 20.00”<sup>25</sup> This visit repeated Davis’s characteristic working method, inspired by English landscape gardening, of “walking round and sketching.” Before advancing any plan, Davis needed to gauge the existing character of the place and consider its pictorial possibilities in detail. Probably during this initial visit, Davis created a watercolor site plan labeled “Morestan plot of ground” that recorded the basic features of the property, including the old farmhouse near the main road, the plantings introduced around the carriage drive, the narrow band of open lawn in front of the house, the sharp drop (dark line) of the escarpment, and the stone walls which crossed the land below the bluff (figure 6.13).<sup>26</sup> In general, this was a site with a strong natural terracing, a feature Davis would work to exploit.

## Dueling Sketches

Professor Morse was a controlling individual, and he came prepared with sketches of what he wanted his redesigned house to look like. At some level, Morse probably still viewed his relationship with Davis in terms of their student-teacher roles from years before. But Davis, with twenty years of practical experience as the leading country house architect of his generation, had developed into mature professional who was highly skilled in leading the design process. At Locust Grove, however, Davis was forced to work hard to achieve a successful collaboration with Morse.

---

<sup>25</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 426.

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, Morse’s new pond does not appear on Davis’s site plan.

The surviving sketches of this process, in both Davis's and Morse hand, provide a unique record of the architectural redesign process. None of these sketches are dated, so an element of uncertainty affects the interpretation of the exact sequence of designs. Nevertheless, the trajectory seems clear from a close study of these drawings, all of which appeared to have been created during Davis's initial three-day visit in April.<sup>27</sup>

### **Floorplan - State 1 - Morse**

Although not labeled, the initial floorplan proposal appears to have been created by Morse (figure 6.14). First of all, what is readily apparent is this is not a Davis plan. It has a lack of coherence and a somewhat willful asymmetry that makes it difficult to read. So what can be gleaned from this design? First, that Morse, like many first time home remodelers, envisioned a very large increase to the footprint of his house. Second, that he desired the construction of a large drawing room and library on the north and south sides of the house. Third, that he planned an arcade, probably with a prospect tower above, flanked by verandas for the riverfront elevation. Fourth, Morse wished to remove an interior partition wall of the original house to create an L-shaped hall. Lastly, it is clear that Morse hadn't really figured out what to do on the east (road) elevation even though this defined the approach from the carriage drive.

---

<sup>27</sup> By May 2, Davis was already drawing up "plans for SFB Po'keepsie" which are marked "as originally designed" indicating that at least a complete floor plan had been worked out with Morse during the initial visit in April. Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 427.

### **Floorplan - State 2 - Davis**

The next plan in this sequence appears to reflect Davis's initial response to his client (figure 6.15).<sup>28</sup> He has regularized Morse's plan, creating equivalent size north and south rectangular additions but running them across rather than away from the original house mass, and added a second, asymmetrically opposed bay window to the north addition. He has deepened the proposed rooms on the west elevation to make them usable spaces. Similarly, he has added recessed steps within the arcade to reflect the change in grade. Lastly, he has wrapped the east elevation in a verandah to completely enclose the original house volume within a square.

### **Elevation - State 3 - Morse**

The next step in the design appears to have been the addition of a two-story porte-cochère on the carriage drive side of the house (east elevation) seen in a view sketched by Morse (figure 6.16). Note that Morse has retained a portion of the trellised veranda on the right side of the porte-cochère. Also, in the second story of this addition, he has added three windows that retain the scale and spacing of the original Federal-style house windows, in effect, preserving the five-bay facade.

### **Floorplan - State 4 - Davis**

While the porte-cochère was a positive step in the design, Morse's sketch pointed out the clumsiness of the proposed one story wings when seen from the carriage loop. Accordingly, Davis reshaped these wings into elongated two-story

---

<sup>28</sup> The line quality and handwriting are definitely Davis's. And this plan clearly follows (and corrects) the problems in the initial plan labeled as belonging to Morse.

octagonal forms (figure 6.17).<sup>29</sup> By faceting the surfaces of the volume in this manner, Davis enhanced the play of light and shadow as one walked around the house. In this somewhat more finished sketch, which Davis labeled “as at first designed,” he has also converted the open arcade of the tower into a four-season parlor with a large bay window to enjoy the river views year round. Finally, the new and old house volumes are still inscribed in a geometrical form, now a rectangle rather than a square. This symmetrical cruciform plan, with its balanced projections, and its bay window pointing to the Hudson River, finally has attained the elegance and functionality of a typical Davis floor plan.

A pencil elevation show the proposed design against its riverfront context (figure 6.18). As Davis’s views make clear, the designed house is intended to be a prominent object on the open lawn terrace visible from all sides. It commands prospects from all directions both from the high tower and from the trellised verandas. Davis also added a skylight above the pyramidal roof of the tower to both embellish the form and let natural light into the top-floor prospect room (figure 6.19). The Federal period house has been completely wrapped in the new Italianate form with the original building footprint and internal arrangements left largely intact inside. Davis has also made changes to the fenestration of the porte-cochère, substituting a rustic Palladian window and outlining the ground level openings with a more substantial rustic arch and keystone.

### **Stylistic Influences**

Davis’s use of the rustic Italianate villa style, which he sometimes referred to as “Tuscan,” was ultimately derived from English villa book sources. By the later

---

<sup>29</sup> This drawing was probably executed in Davis’s office on May 2, reflecting the consensus view agreed upon by both men during the initial April meeting. Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 427.

1840s, however, he had made this style fully his own. So his work at Locust Grove relates more to his own portfolio of designs than any pattern book source.<sup>30</sup> The projecting gabled form of the porte-cochere at Locust Grove strongly resembles Davis's design for Hawkswood at Green Springs, Virginia that he was designing at the same time (figure 6.20). Another contemporaneous project was his Italianate villa design for Llewellyn Haskell at Belleville, New Jersey, begun in January of 1851, which employed a related vocabulary of bold towers, round-arched windows, porte cochères, and trellised verandahs (figure 6.21). Beginning in the later half of the 1840s, Davis's version of the Italianate tower villa also became his preferred approach for architectural remodeling projects. Besides his 1849 tower addition to the Dr. Oliver Bronson House, (discussed in Chapter 5), Davis employed Italianate tower additions for his redesign work for Lewis Morris at Fordham, New York (figure 6.22), and George Beach in Hartford, Connecticut (figure 6.23), both from 1847.

### **Italianate Symmetry**

In viewing Davis's Italianate designs as a group, one is struck by the differentiation between the irregular massing used in most of the projects, and the symmetrical design he created with Morse.<sup>31</sup> Given that Morse initially sketched a somewhat irregular floor plan (see figure 6.12) for the redesign, he does not appear to have objected to picturesque irregularity. This suggests that Davis was the source of the desire for symmetry. He regularized Morse's

---

<sup>30</sup> While Davis is known primarily as architect of the Gothic Revival, he executed fully as many projects in the Italianate villa style, especially during the second half of the 1840s and first half of the 1850s.

<sup>31</sup> The Italianate addition at The Dr. Oliver Bronson House is also largely symmetrical (with the exception of the secondary bays). But this choice by Davis is shaped primarily by the need to conform to the symmetrical design of the original Federal house and the central placement of the attic story pediment.



original floor plan and balanced the porte-cochere and tower with flattened octagonal forms. The question is why? The most likely answer relates to the relationship of the house to the landscape. The house was not backed up against a wood or hillside which landscape gardeners typically used to complement an irregular building outline but, instead, was sited on a relatively narrow and flat lawn, fully visible from all sides, and from the open pastures below the bluff. Evidently, Davis envisioned the house and lawn terrace as together forming a classical composition.<sup>32</sup> The natural terracing of the site already mirrored the artificial terracing of Italian Renaissance villas. Davis sought to complement and enhance this effect by employing a symmetrical house design. So the character of the landscape scene he wished to define appears to have dominated his typical architectural preferences.

### **Redesigning the Redesign**

If the Davis-Morse design had been executed as planned, it would have been reckoned as one of his more successful projects. But it was not to be. On May 12, 1851, Davis wrote that he had “prepared specifications and finished two elevations” and on May 23 that the somewhat impatient “Mr M took the plans.”<sup>33</sup> On June 3, Davis made another three day visit to Poughkeepsie which he spent revising the plans with Morse.<sup>34</sup>

What happened? Most likely the client objected to the proposed fees for the project, since in the revised plan, the octagonal additions were lopped off and

---

<sup>32</sup> Or, in language of Loudon and Downing, Davis intended a landscape composition in the “beautiful mode” rather than the “picturesque mode.”

<sup>33</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 427.

<sup>34</sup> “1851 June 3-5 Revised Mr. Morse two days, completing plans.” Davis Day Book, Vol. 1, 427.

replaced by smaller three-sided bays. Unfortunately, this change disturbed the balance of the composition, which was now dominated by the large square tower. To attempt to rebalance the design, Davis wrapped the new bays with a pair of verandahs, inscribing the house mass in an octagon (figure 6.24). He marked this design “as executed.” But Morse appears to have demanded further changes. A watercolor sketch in Davis’s office Journal (likely created in the following decade), shows that only the southern veranda was constructed (figure 6.25), with an abbreviated rectangular porch of a different design constructed along the North face of the tower (figure 6.26). So, in the end, Morse ended up with a somewhat irregular design that offered picturesque variety when approached from different angles. By August of 1851, a contractor had been hired and work was underway. Davis visited in August and October to superintend the construction work that continued during the winter and was completed the following spring.

### **The Landscape Garden at Locust Grove**

Up to this point, the design process between Davis and Morse appears to have been dominated by architectural rather than landscape gardening considerations. The design was conventionally worked up from a sequence of iterated floor plans into a set of elevations and only then reconnected to the landscape. But this appears to have been driven largely by Davis’s strong-willed client. Presented with a set of floor plan sketches, Davis needed to respond and shape the design within this framework while simultaneously thinking about the impact on the overall landscape picture he was attempting to create.

Having not received any word (or payment) from Morse over the summer of 1852, Davis sent Morse a note on his stationary (figure 6.27) on September 1, 1852 that began “My Dear Friend - It is now some time since I have heard from you, and I am curious to learn how you find your new home and what you are doing

to make the grounds more beautiful."<sup>35</sup> Morse promptly enclosed payment and updated Davis on his project the next day. Morse's letter does not survive. But Davis's next letter to Morse from September 5, 1852 does. He writes: "Of course your landscape gardening is going on according to Whately, Repton, Loudon, & Downing, and is immediately to exhibit the most finished illustration of Natural Beauty – the art modestly retiring to the background."<sup>36</sup> After this diplomatic preamble, Davis goes on to make some recommendations: "Allow me to suggest that you terrace the north side of the house, and so trellis and plant as to balance or symmetrize with the south veranda. Also, that the plantations so approach the house that portions [of the house] only may be seen from any one point, peeping from forth the verdure, and so playing upon the imagination that an idea of great extent of accommodation and an infinite variety of picturesque beauty be presented to the exercised mind."<sup>37</sup>

This letter provides a clear indication of Davis's intentions for the landscape. First, he desired a typically picturesque approach created by carefully screening the house and the property border from the road to create "an idea of great extent of accommodation" and then providing small glimpses of the river and main house from the drive before the dramatic reveal. Next, he wished to terrace the ground around the house, building a berm that heightened the monumentality of the prospect tower and complemented the natural terracing of the land. Lastly, he wished to train vines on the house to soften its presence and

---

<sup>35</sup> In this letter Davis also asks whether Morse desires his house stuccoed according to the plan and mentions a possible joint visit to Blithewood. Letter from AJD to SFB Morse dated Sept 1, 1852. Library of Congress.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from AJD to SFB Morse dated Sept 5, 1852. Library of Congress.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

related to the Italian villa landscape designs that inspired Locust Grove.<sup>38</sup> A watercolor view of the west elevation shows how Davis intended the vines and terracing to complement the original house design (figure 6.28).

Even, though Davis had difficulty getting Morse to accept many of his architectural ideas, period photos and records of visits to Locust Grove make clear that many of Davis's landscaping recommendations were eventually followed. In *The Hudson, From the Wilderness to the Sea* (1860), Benson J. Lossing illustrated an engraved view of Locust Grove that shows the approach to the house had been planted according to Davis's wishes (figure 6.29). Lossing describes it as follows: "the mansion is so embowered that it is almost invisible to the traveler on the highway. But immediately around it are gardens, conservatories, and a pleasant lawn, basking in the sunshine, and through vistas of magnificent trees, glimpses may be caught of the Hudson, the northern and southern ranges of mountains, and villages that dot the western shore of the river."<sup>39</sup>

The ground was also built up around the house to heighten the terrace effect and vines were trained onto the tower as seen in a photo from the 1870s (figure 6.30). A period engraving (figure 6.31) shows another view of the lawn terrace, with the greenhouse added by Morse in 1859 next to the circa 1830s stable constructed by the Montgomerys. He also added a summerhouse on the bluff south of the house sometime during the 1850s. Other than these relatively minor post-Davis additions, Morse's largest contribution was to reshape the open agricultural land below the bluff by selectively reintroducing woods and realigning the straight stone walls that ran across the fields to create a more distinctive landscape

---

<sup>38</sup> Also included in this letter, is another attempt by Davis to "symmetrize" the design.

<sup>39</sup> Benson J. Lossing, *The Hudson, From the Wilderness to the Sea* (Troy, NY: H.B. Nims & Co., 1866), 191.

picture when viewed from the terrace above.<sup>40</sup> A glimpse of the completed landscape garden below the bluff can be seen in a historic photo (figure 6.32).

### **Later Years (1872-present)**

After Morse's death in 1872, his second family and children from his first marriage continued to summer at Locust Grove for another twenty years. In 1895, the property was sold to William and Martha Young. The Youngs removed Henry Livingston, Jr.'s farm house from the drive and the second farm house on the riverfront, completing the transformation from farm to pleasure grounds. The house redesigned by Davis and Morse was maintained relatively intact with the exception of an early twentieth century dining room extension built on the north side of the house that replaced the 1851 bay. While compatible in style with the rest of the house, this extension further augmented the irregularity of the massing (figure 6.33). During the Young's long ownership, second growth forest gradually filled in the riverfront area. When the property was converted into a museum in 1975, this area was maintained as a wildlife preserve that it had become rather than the landscape garden it was in Morse's time. Today only a small gap in the woods connects the property to the once extensive river view (figure 6.34).

### **Conclusion**

Davis's early relationship with Samuel F.B. Morse during the 1820s, and his involvement with Morse's New York Drawing Association and the National Academy of Design were formative experiences in his development as an artist and architect. Davis was probably first introduced to the topic of landscape

---

<sup>40</sup> It is likely (but undocumented) that Morse and Davis discussed future plans for the lower fields on the multiple site visits during the design/construction process where they walked the grounds.

gardening as an art form, and the work of Thomas Whately through Morse's famous *Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts* in 1826.<sup>41</sup> And Morse provided encouragement and support for Davis's *Rural Residences* project during the 1830s, supplying the landscape gardening-inspired cover vignette.

So when the two individuals came together in 1851 to redesign Locust Grove, Davis probably was anticipating a satisfying and relaxed project. Two old friends, with a shared past, applying the techniques and theories of the English landscape tradition they had both long admired and discussed to create a beautiful Hudson River composition. But, as the drawings and Davis's diary entries attest, this proved to be a difficult commission for Davis and the final design executed was considerably different than his initial plans. And while Morse eventually followed many of Davis's landscaping ideas, he was effectively shut out of the process after the initial house remodeling was completed. This was unfortunate since at this time Davis's capabilities as a landscape gardener and architect were at their peak.

It was during this same summer of 1852 that Davis's collaborator for the past twelve years, Andrew Jackson Downing, was tragically killed in a steamboat explosion. And later in the fall, Davis learned that his friend Robert Donaldson had sold Blithewood and was moving to another estate further south. So although Davis continued working at Montgomery Place until the early 1870s, and still had yet to begin his redesign of Lyndhurst (1860-65), his career-defining picturesque transformation work in the Hudson Valley was largely completed. It was the end of an era.

---

<sup>41</sup> Morse also repeated this lecture series for the National Academy of Design in 1829 and 1835.

Figure 6.1



Samuel F. B. Morse. "The Morse Family." 1810. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 6.2



Samuel F. B. Morse. "Self-Portrait." 1810. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 6.3



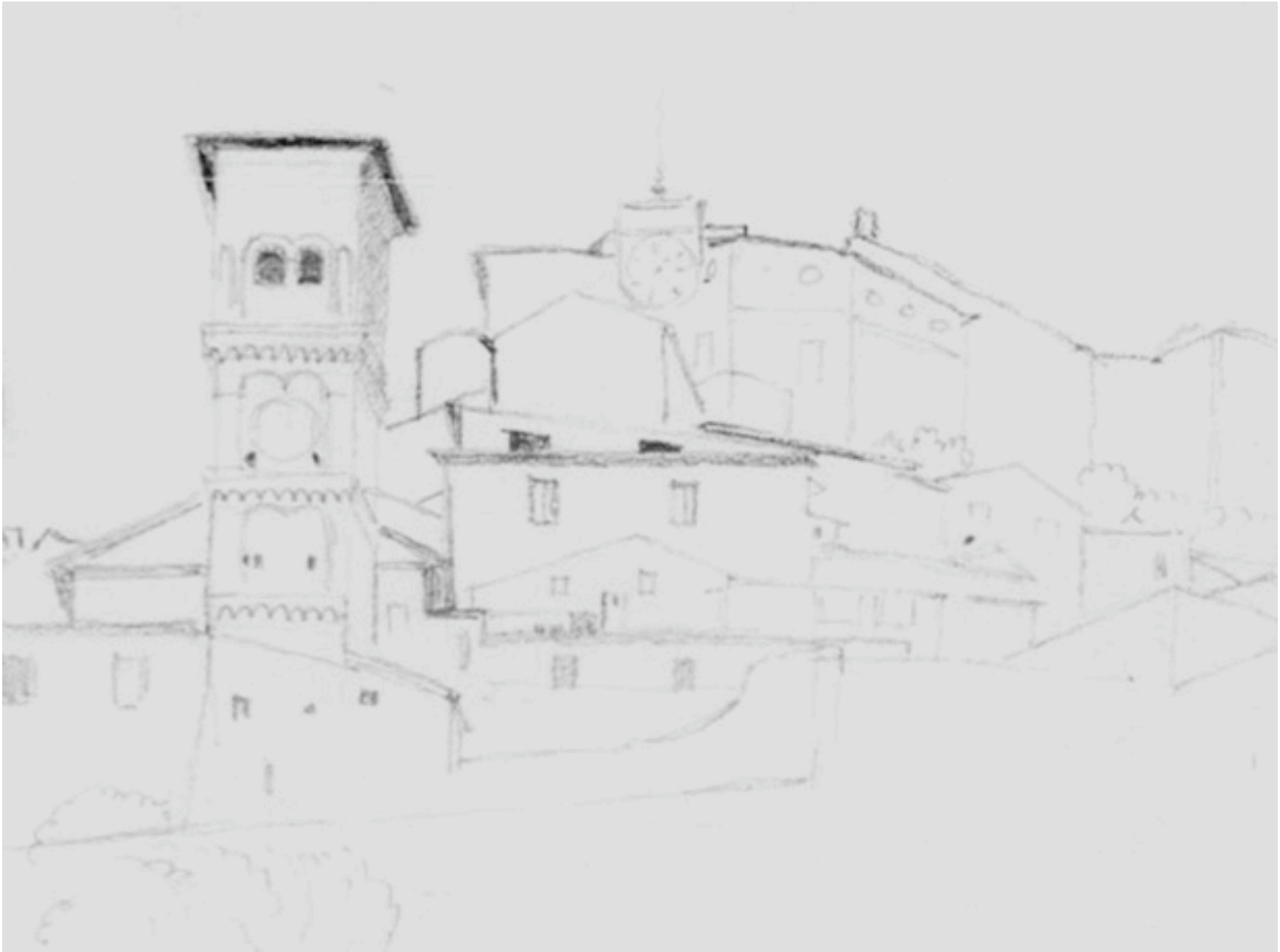
Washington Allston. "Elijah in the Desert." 1818. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 6.4



Washington Allston. "Moonlight Landscape." 1809. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 6.5



Samuel F.B. Morse. Sketch of an Italian architectural scene. 1830. Samuel F.B Morse diaries, 22 December 1829-3 May 1830. Library of Congress.

Figure 6.6



A.J. Davis. View of Administration Building, NYU. 1833. NYU archives.

Figure 6.7



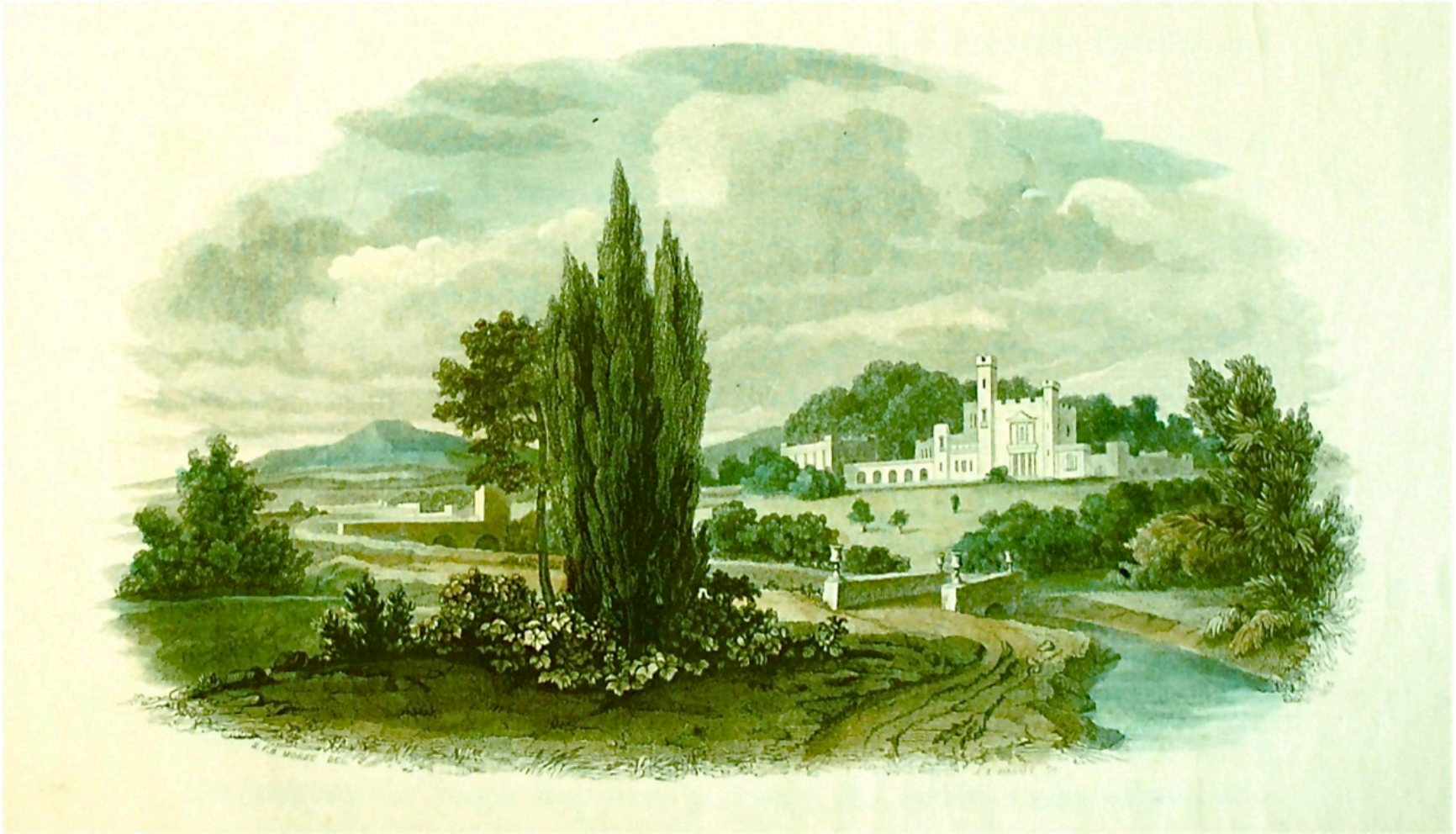
Samuel F.B. Morse. "Landscape Composition: Helicon and Aganippe (Allegorical Landscape of NYU)." 1836. N-YHS.

Figure 6.8



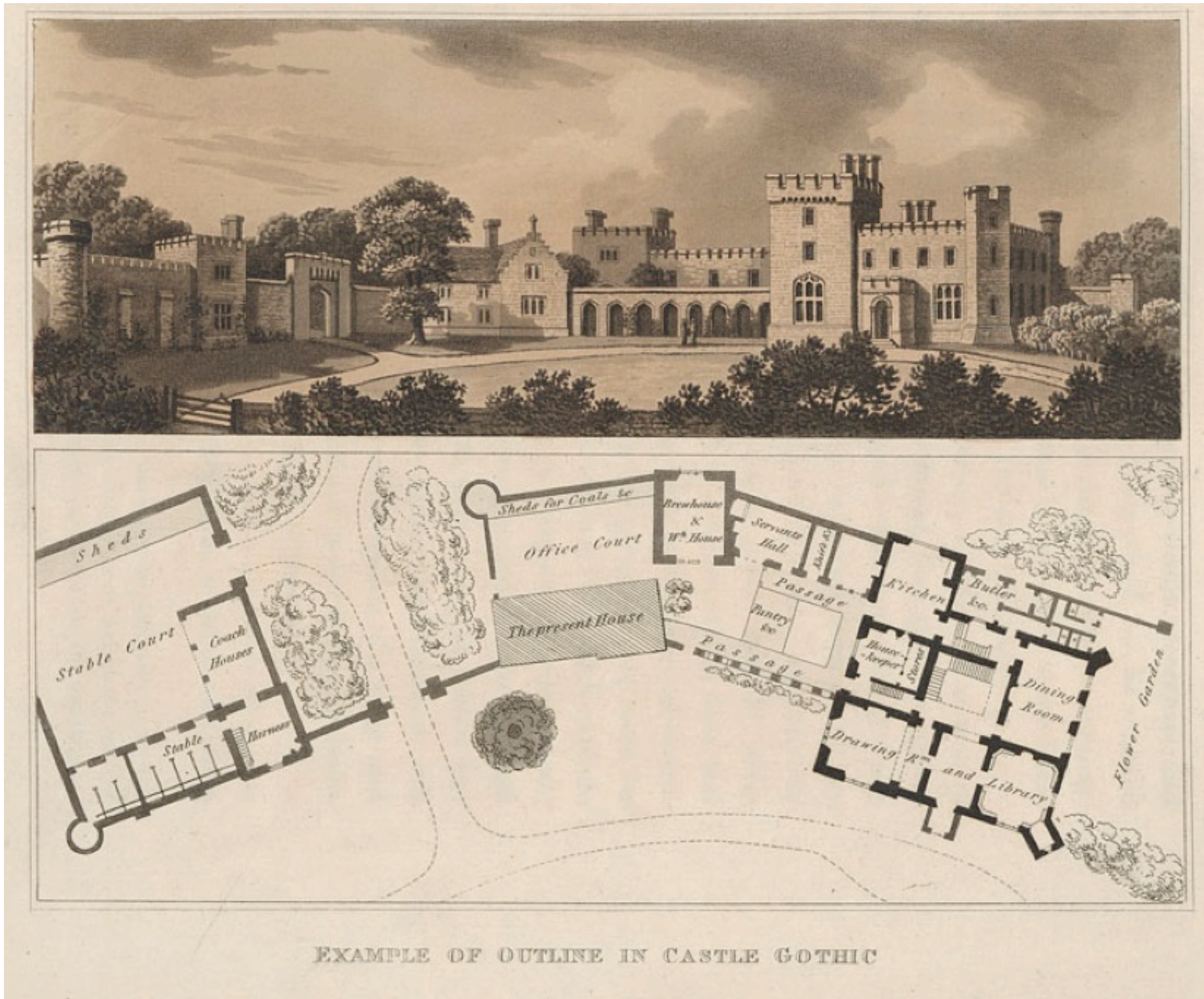
Samuel F.B. Morse. "Landscape." 1836. Avery (NYDA.1940.001.00016)

Figure 6.9



Alexander Jackson Davis. Frontispiece to *Rural Residences* (engraved by J.A. Adams after S.F.B. Morse). 1837. Avery (NYDA.1955.001.00224)

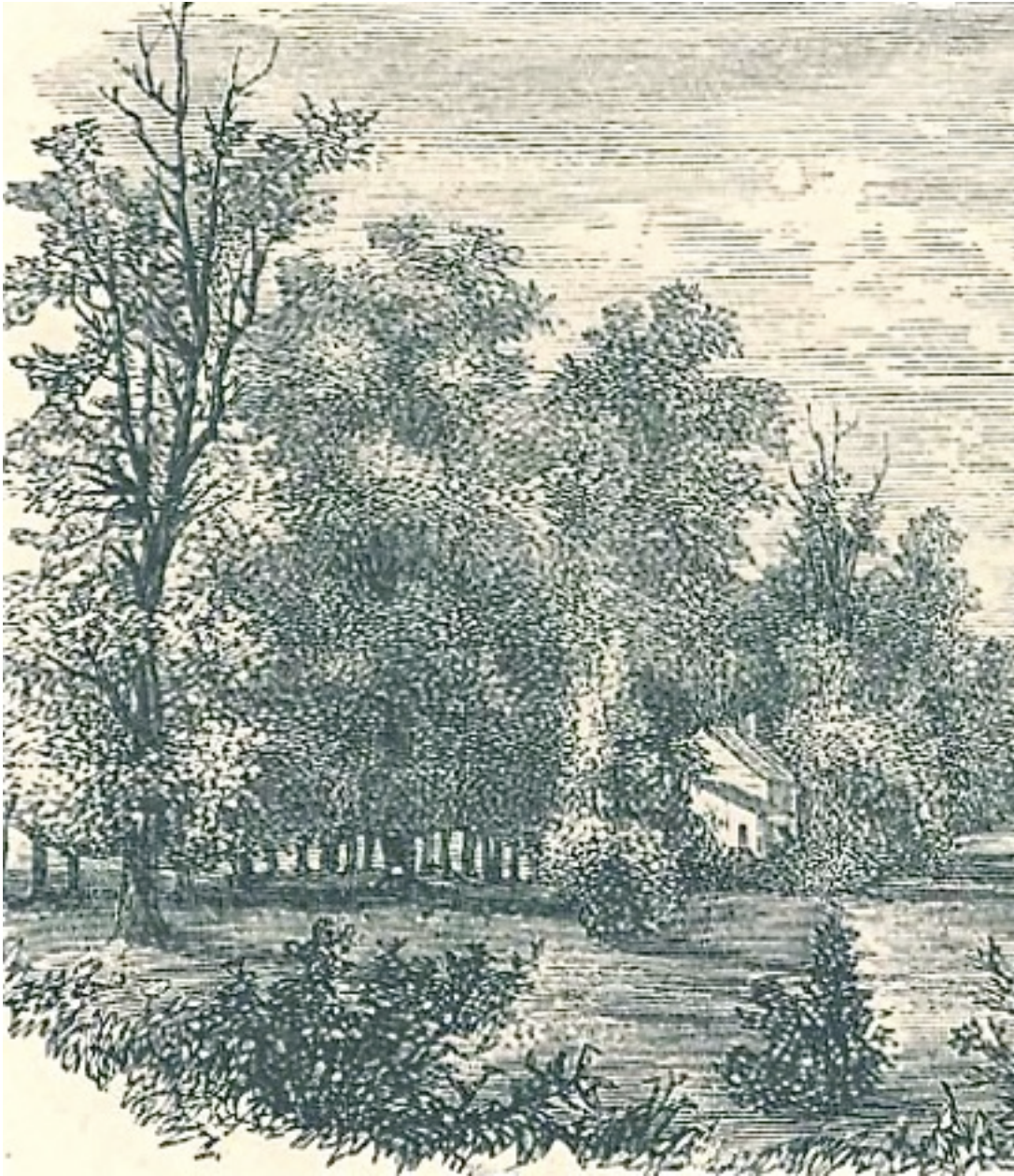
Figure 6.10



Humphry Repton. "Example of Outline in Castle Gothic" from *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816).

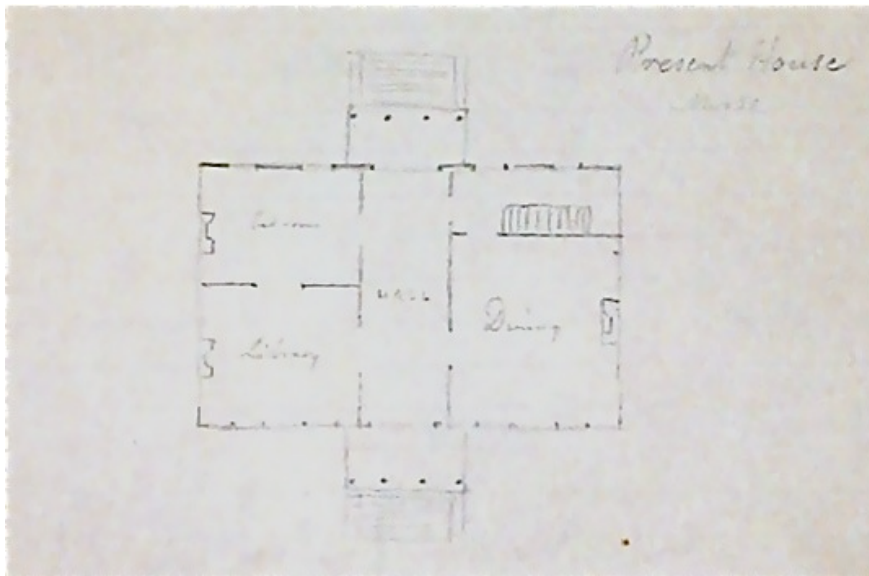
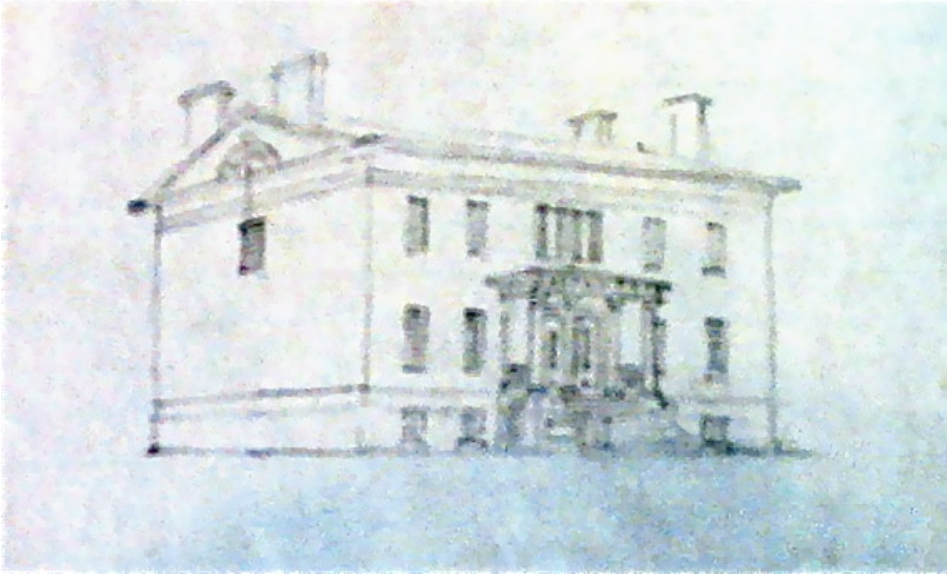


Figure 6.11



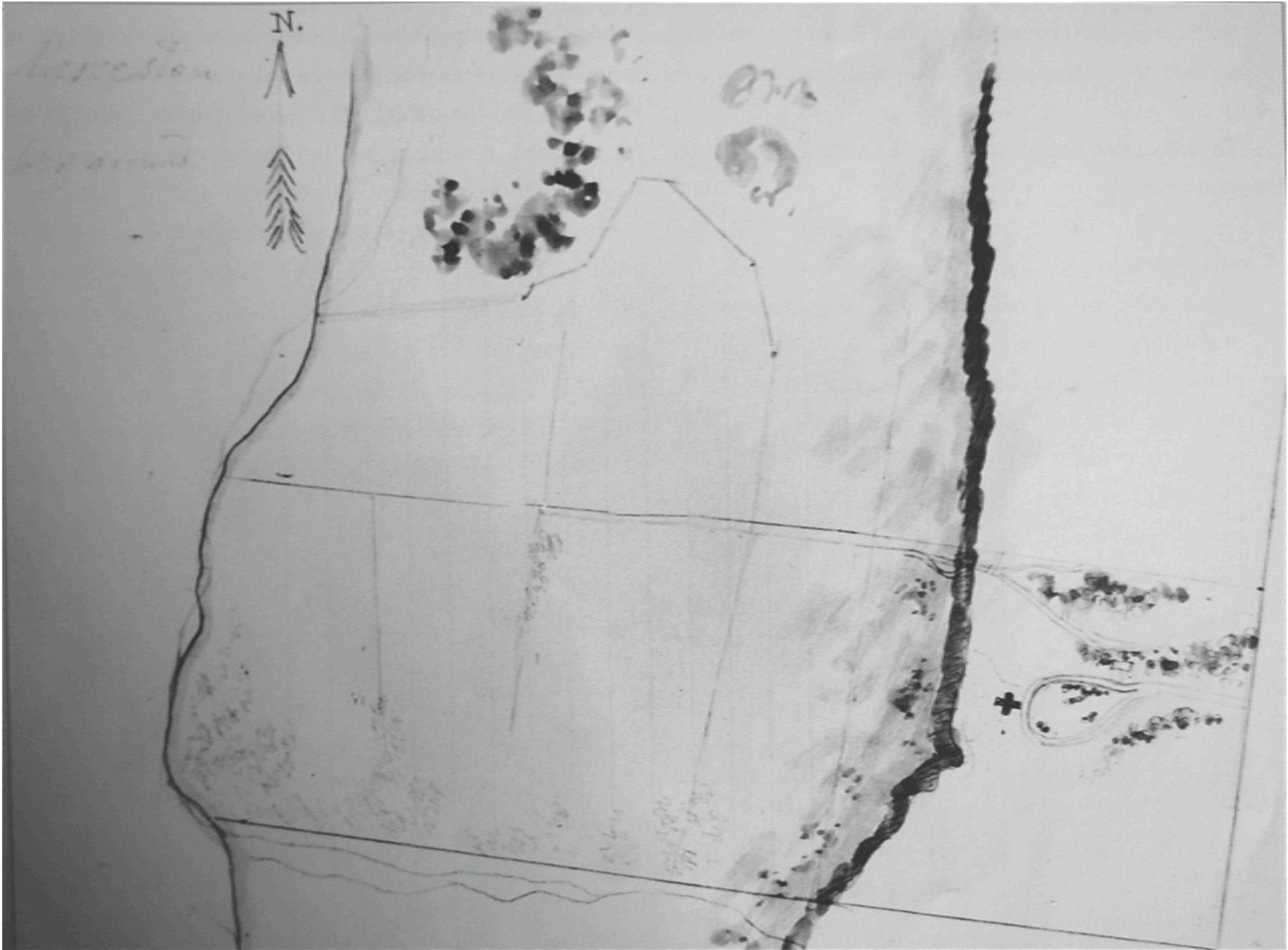
Benson J. Lossing. Detail from "Locust Grove" from *The Hudson, from the wilderness to the sea* (1866).

Figure 6.12



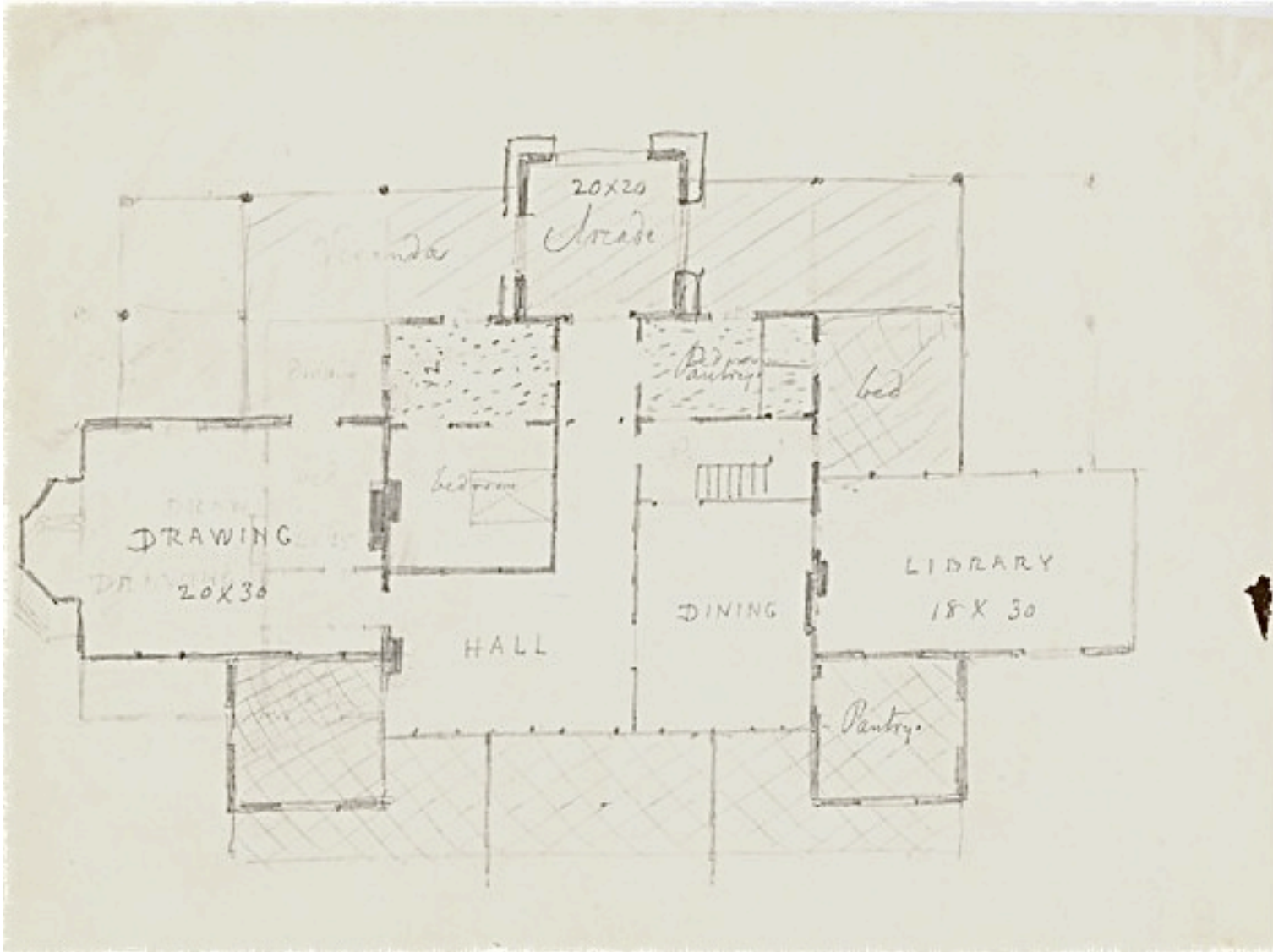
Samuel F.B. Morse (top) and A.J. Davis (bottom). Sketches of original Montgomery House. Circa 1851. Locust Grove Estate.

Figure 6.13



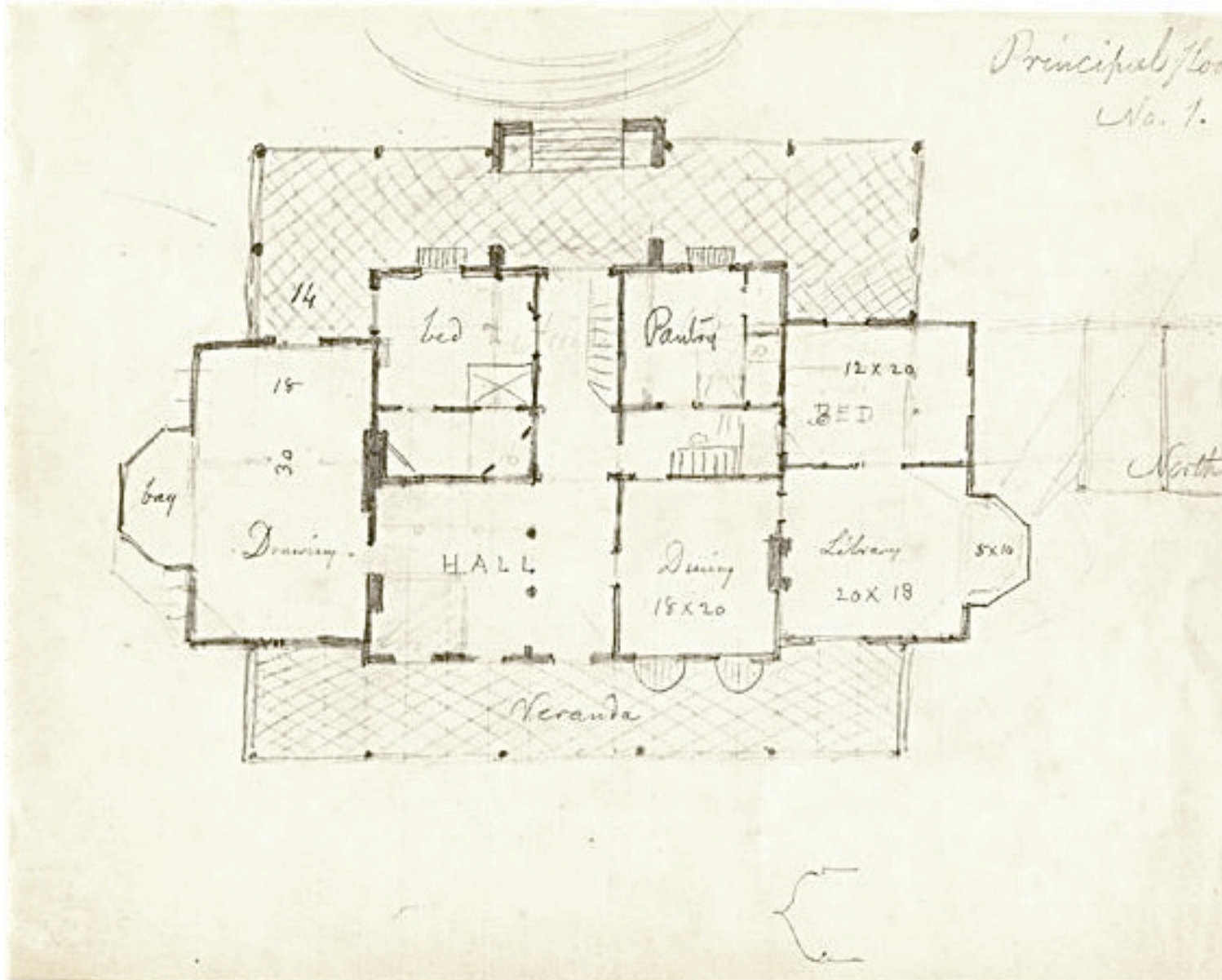
A.J. Davis. "Morestan. Plot of Ground." 1851. Locust Grove Estate.

Figure 6.14



Samuel F.B. Morse (w/ A.J. Davis notation in cursive). Locust Grove. Proposed Principal Floor Plan (State 1). 1851. Locust Grove Estate.

Figure 6.15



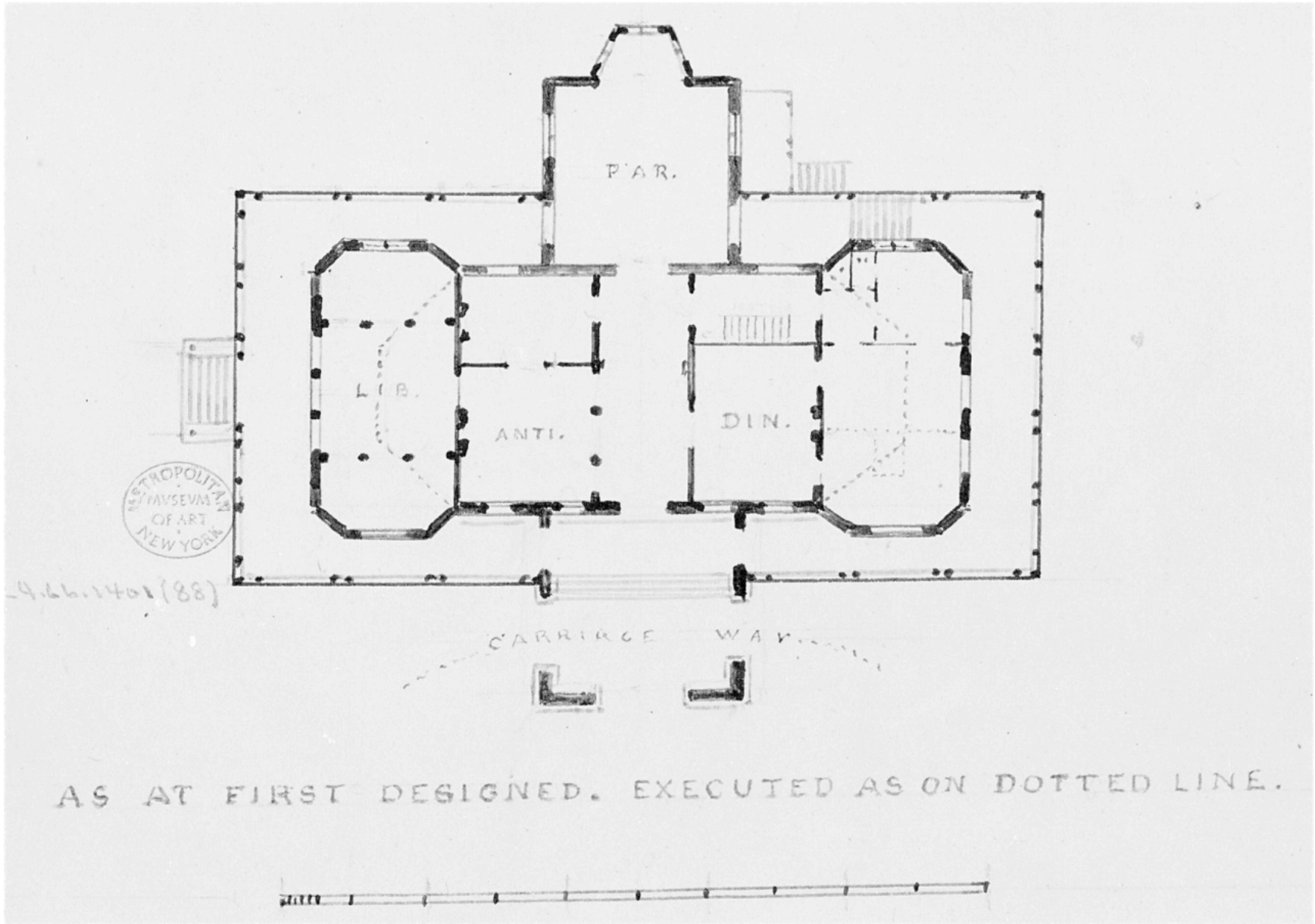
A.J. Davis. Locust Grove. Proposed Principal Floor Plan (state 2). 1851. Locust Grove Estate.

Figure 6.16



Samuel F.B. Morse. Locust Grove. Proposed East Elevation (state 3). 1851. Locust Grove Estate.

Figure 6.17



A.J. Davis. Locust Grove. Proposed Principal Floor Plan "As At First Designed" (state 4). 1851. MMA (24.66.1401(88)).

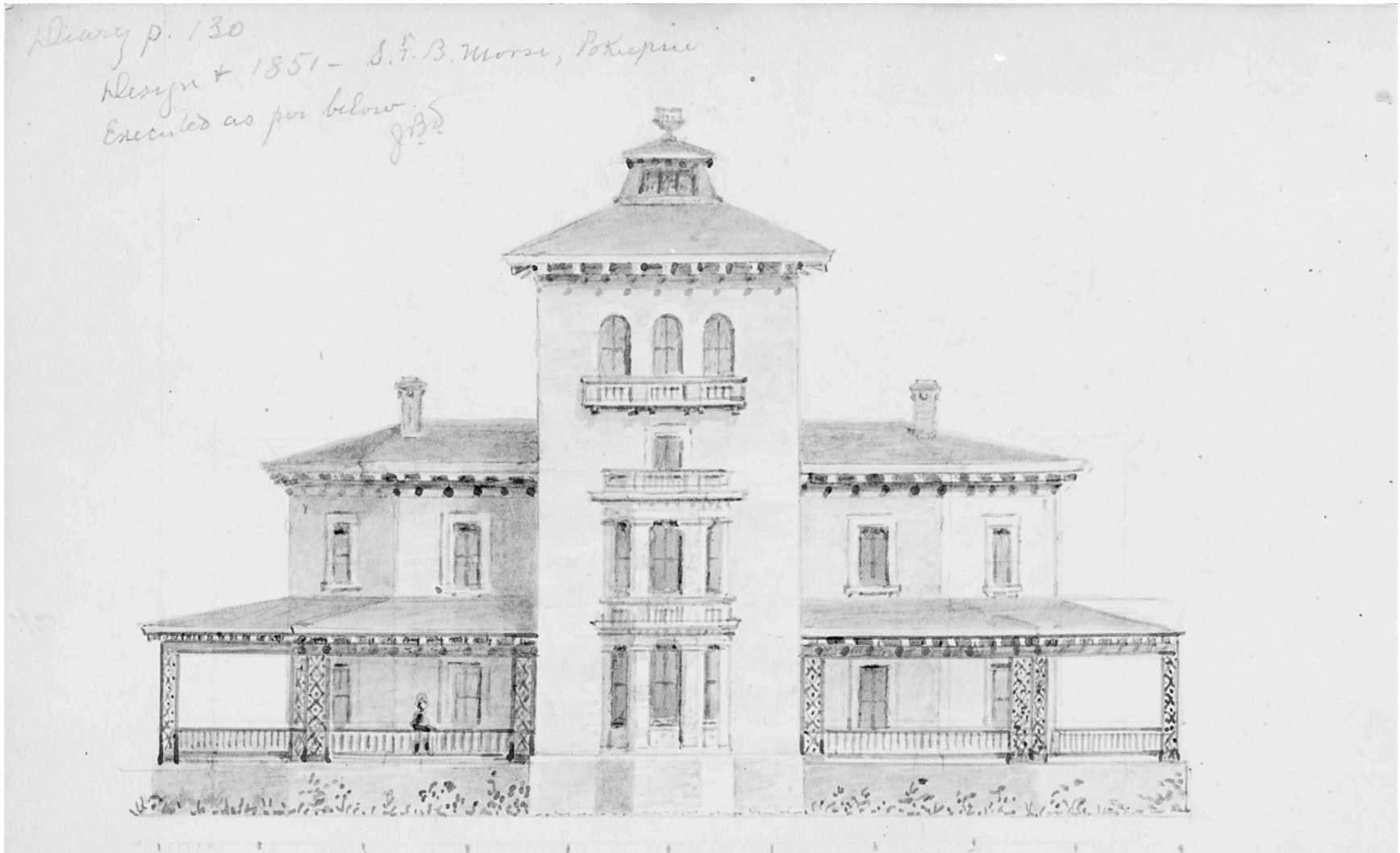
Figure 6.18



A.J. Davis. Locust Grove. Perspective View of East Elevation (state 4). 1851. MMA (24.66.1401(88)).



Figure 6.19



A.J. Davis. Locust Grove. Proposed East Elevation (state 4). 1851. MMA (24.66.1401(88)).

Figure 6.20



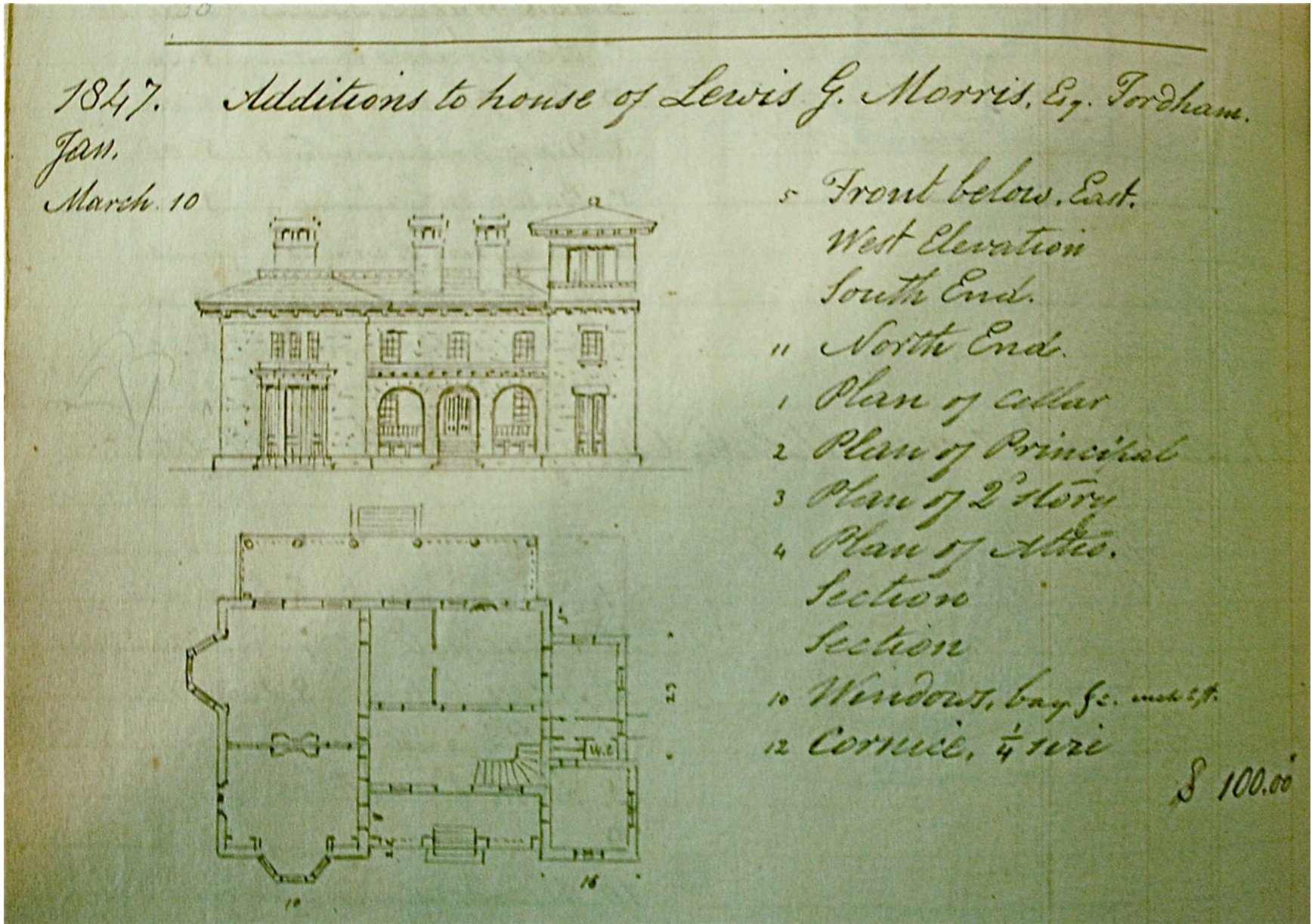
A.J. Davis. Hawkwood for Richard O. Morris, Green Springs, VA. 1851-54. MMA (24.66.60).

Figure 6.21



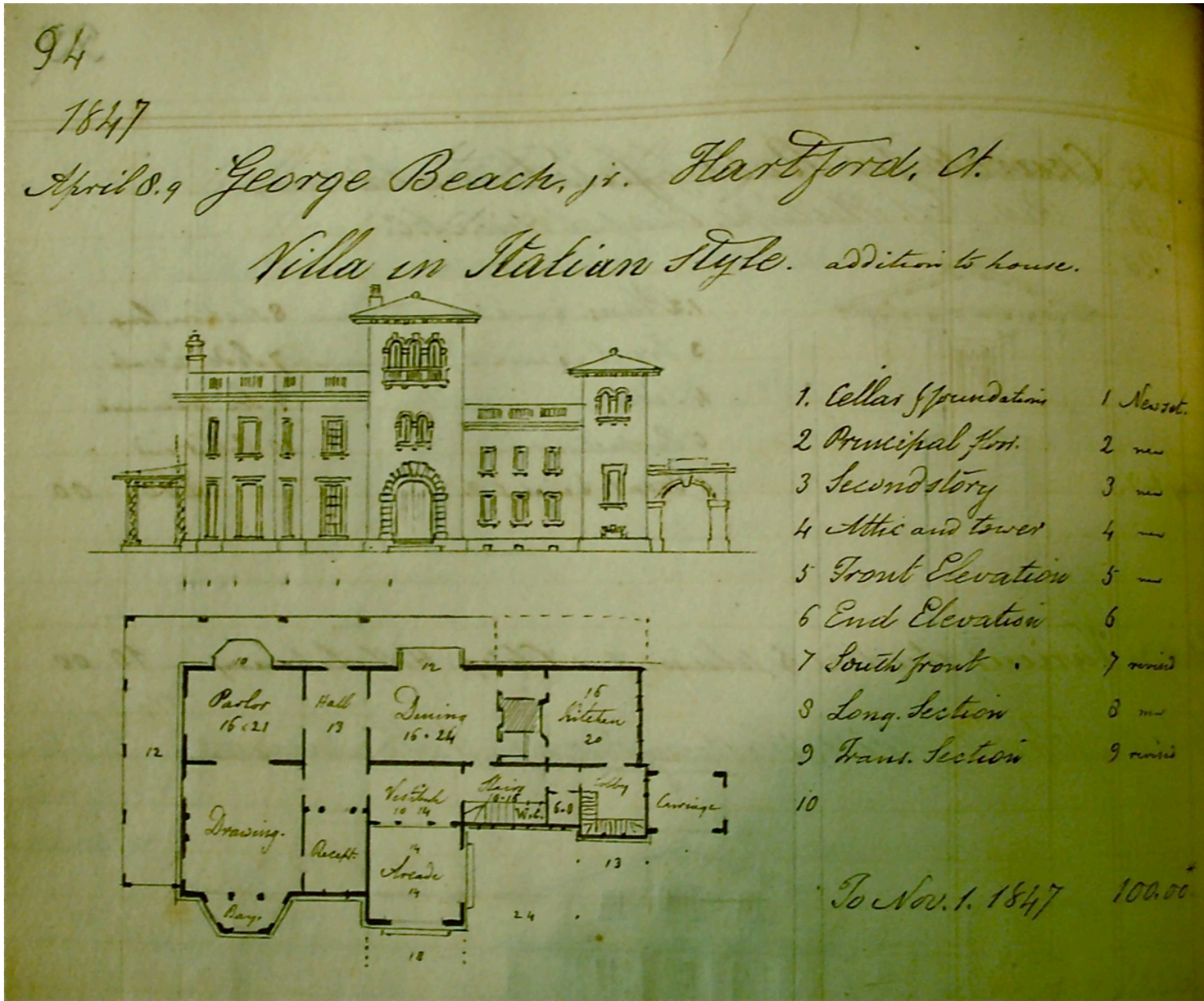
A.J. Davis. "Belmont", Italianate villa for Llewellyn Haskell, Belleville, NJ. 1850-52. Davis office Journal, MMA (24.66.1400).

Figure 6.22



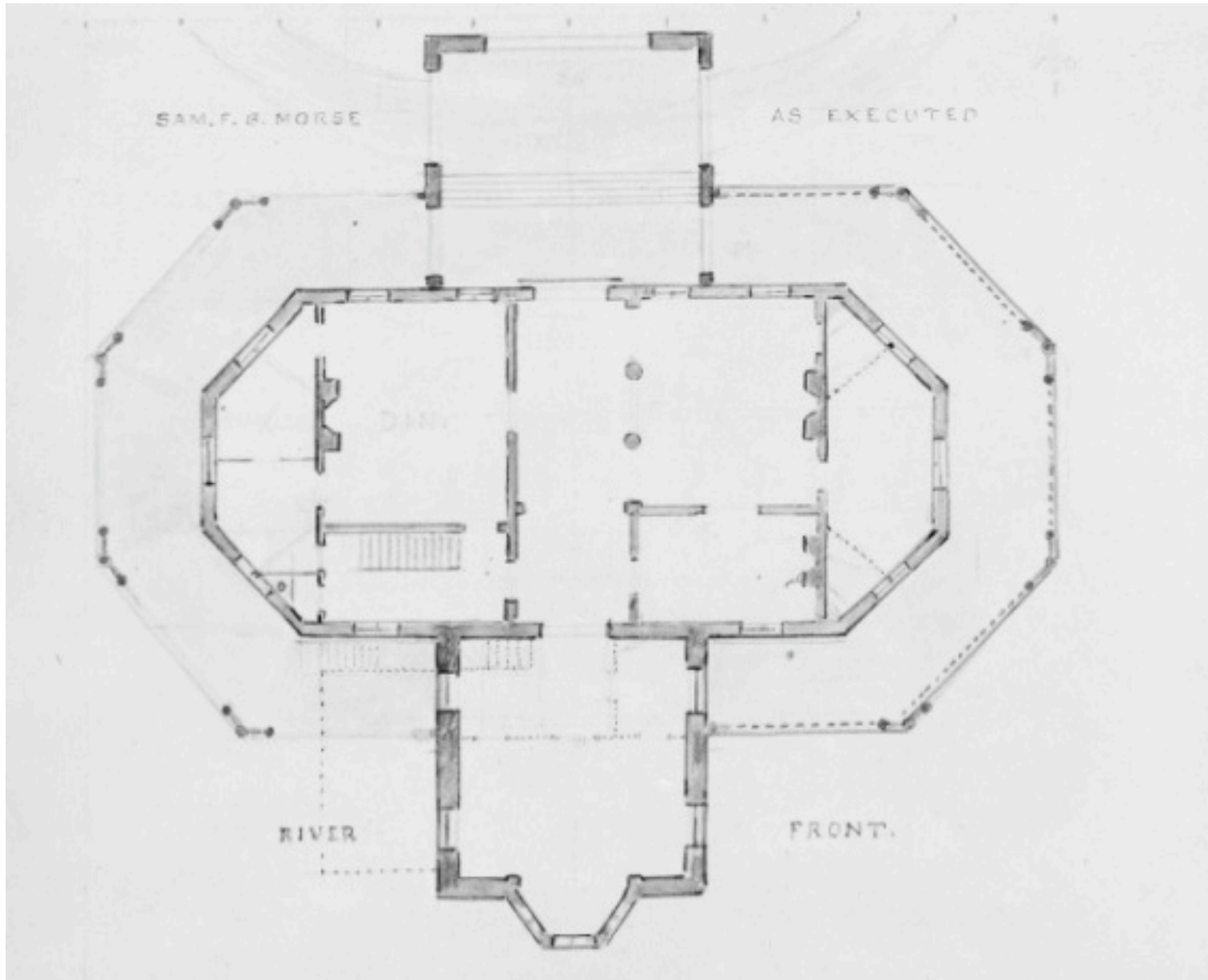
A.J. Davis. Lewis G. Morris House, Mount Fordham, Bronx, NY. 1846-47. Davis office Journal, MMA (24.66.1400).

Figure 6.23



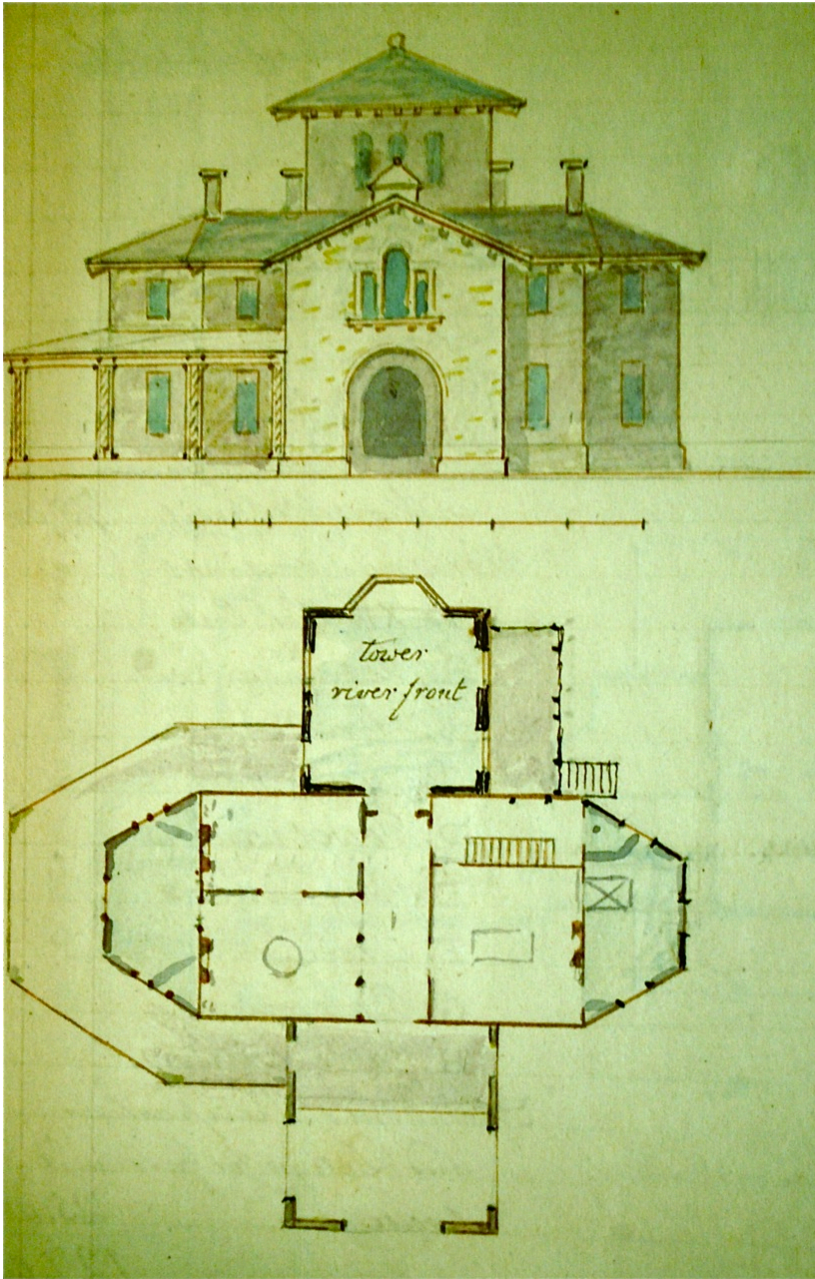
A.J. Davis. George Beach, Jr. House, Hartford, CT (apparently not executed). 1847. Davis office Journal, MMA (24.66.1400).

Figure 6.24



A.J. Davis. Locust Grove. Proposed Principal Floor Plan (state 5). 1851. MMA (24.66.1401(88)).

Figure 6.25



A.J. Davis. Locust Grove. East Elevation and Floorplan (final state). 1851. Davis office Journal, MMA (24.66.1400).

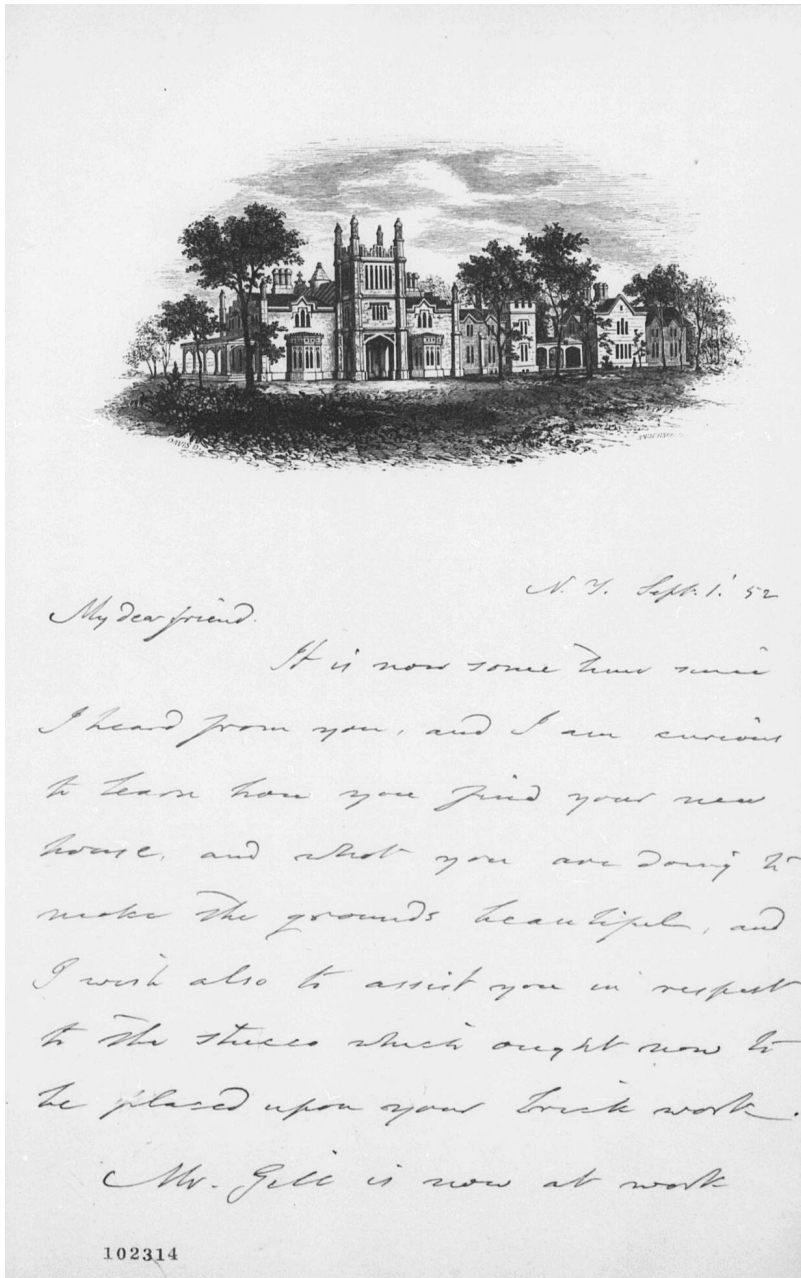
Figure 6.26



View of northwest veranda. December, 2011. Image: Peter Watson.



Figure 6.27



A.J. Davis. Facsimile of letter to Samuel F.B. Morse, dated Sept 1, 1852. Library of Congress.

Figure 6.28



Locust Grove. Watercolor view of west elevation (state 2). NYPL.

Figure 6.29



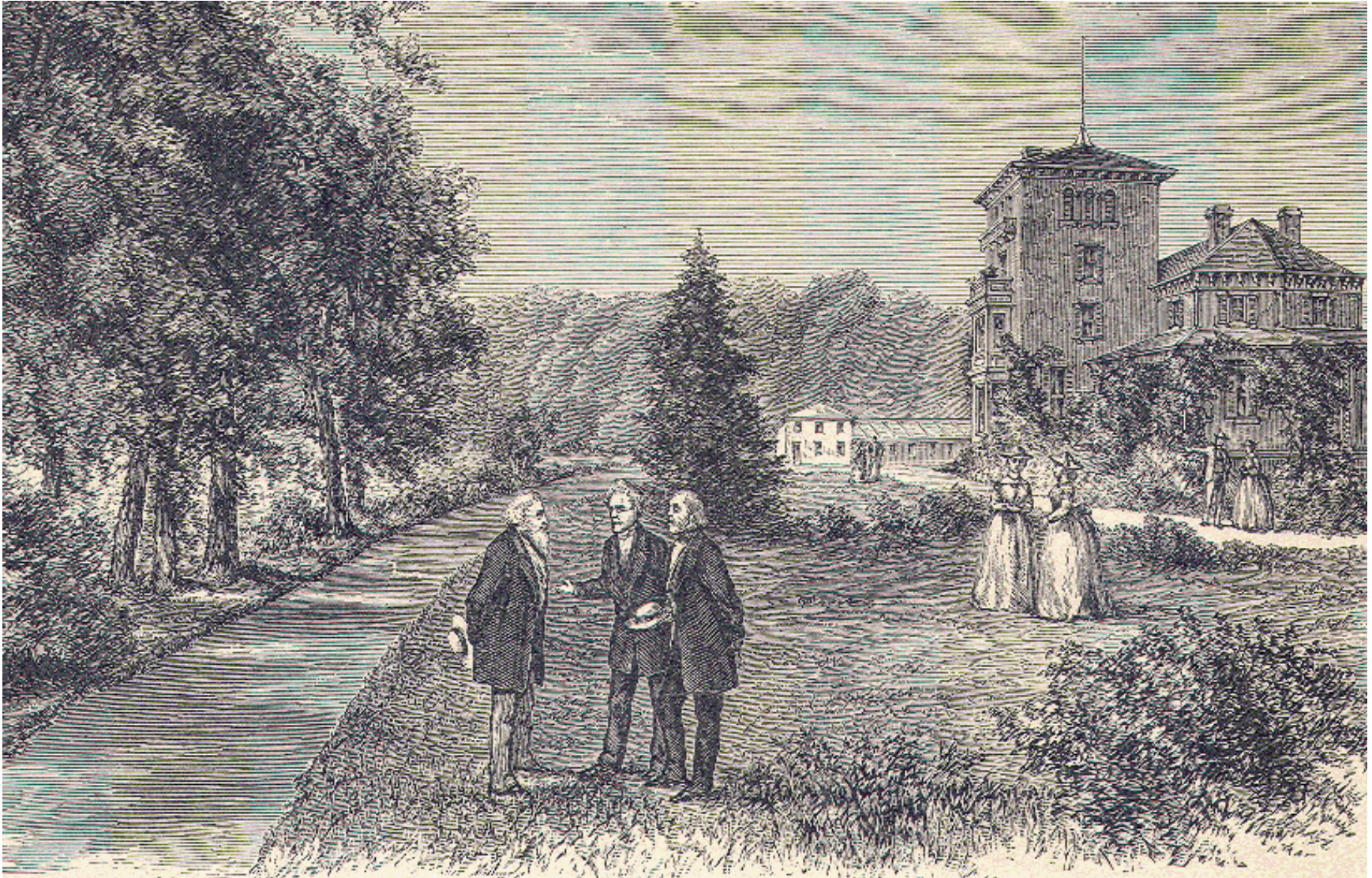
Benson J. Lossing. "Locust Grove" from *The Hudson, from the wilderness to the sea* (1866).

Figure 6.30



Photo of Locust Grove circa 1870. Locust Grove Estate.

Figure 6.31



Engraving of Locust Grove. Circa 1860-1870. Wikipedia.

Figure 6.32



Photograph of riverfront below bluff. Circa 1902. Locust Grove Estate.

Figure 6.33



West elevation showing new dining room extension (left of drainpipe). Photo: Peter Watson.

Figure 6.34



Locust Grove viewed from the lawn terrace. December, 2011. Photo; Peter Watson.



## **Chapter 7**

### **Picturesque Transformations: Contemporary Preservation Issues**

## **Contemporary Preservation Issues**

This paper has traced the role of English landscape gardening in inspiring A.J. Davis's self-conception as "architectural composer" and guiding his work at the four Hudson Valley "picturesque transformation" projects analyzed here. The focus up to this point has been to develop a richer understanding of what these projects meant to both client and architect, how they developed, and what specific sources Davis drew from. In this final section, the discussion turns to contemporary preservation issues. How can the historical understanding of Davis's compositional strategies, working methods, and characteristic aesthetic choices developed in this study be brought to bear on current preservation challenges at these four properties, all of which are institutionally owned? What preservation and interpretation priorities emerge from a consideration of Davis as both landscape gardener and architect? How can the specific conversations between Davis and his clients in these landscapes be made imageable and "present" for visitors today?

## **Davis Era in Context**

To begin to consider these issues, it must be recognized that the Davis-era landscapes form only one of multiple layers of history at each of the Hudson Valley sites in this study. Later owners such as the Youngs at Locust Grove, the Delafields at Montgomery Place, and the Zabriskies at Blithewood made their own design contributions which are historically significant in their own right and form an important part of the current interpretation at these properties.<sup>1</sup> Only at the Dr. Oliver Bronson House is the slate relatively open. The period of significance for this National Historic Landmark has been limited to the Bronson-

---

<sup>1</sup> All four landscapes also contain remnants of the Colonial-era, Native American, and pre-historical past that are more or less present at each site.

Davis era (1839-1850), and the house is unoccupied and in the early stages of stabilization/restoration.

Current property usage and the development of adjoining sites also dictate the degree to which the Davis-era landscapes can be effectively preserved and interpreted. While Locust Grove and Montgomery Place are house museums, the former Blithewood estate is today a modern college campus, and the Dr. Oliver Bronson is located on the grounds of a state correctional facility. The result is that although Davis's picturesque transformations share many common design elements, the range of viable options for preserving and interpreting these features vary widely across these four cultural resources. Each must be considered as a separate case. The current management of these sites entails many complexities of administration and financing not covered in this study. Accordingly, the recommendations that follow are, in general, more suggestive than prescriptive. The goal is to identify a range of actionable preservation strategies for each property that bring into focus the dialogue between Davis and his clients about landscape, architecture, and the genius loci of the Hudson Valley.

## **1. Blithewood**

Blithewood is a study in extremes. On the one hand, the project is wonderfully documented in the archives through Davis's many drawings that allow one to imaginatively walk around the property, seeing Davis's carefully composed landscape scenes through his eyes. On the other hand, the historical Blithewood estate of Donaldson and Davis has been almost completely submerged under later layers of development by the Bard (1852-1897) and Zabriskie (1899-1951) eras, and, more extensively, by the expansion of the Bard College campus (1951-present). At first glance, the historic Blithewood appears to be "too far gone" to permit any kind of successful preservation intervention. But look again, and

many opportunities present themselves, beginning at the entrance to the modern campus on Blithewood Avenue.

### **1a - The 1841 Blithewood Gatehouse**

This study has highlighted the important role park entrance lodges played within the English landscape gardening tradition as architectural objects in the landscape that signal the overall character of the estate. The one surviving architectural element of Davis's landscape composition, the 1841 hexagonal gatehouse, is an extremely important example of this form that showcases some of Davis's most concentrated thinking about how to express picturesque concepts of light and shadow in architectural form. But the existing condition of the gatehouse today, with its insipid grayish-white and dove blue color scheme, lumpy stucco, and later accretions (bathroom windows, screen doors) completely buries these meanings. Changes to the roadway, grading, stone retaining walls, and planting also make it difficult to read that this small structure at the side of the road before the turnoff to the college once dramatically defined the entrance to the Blithewood estate (figure 7.1). As Davis's watercolor drawing shows, the gatehouse originally sat high above the public road on a hexagonal architectural plinth that was sited on a raised earthwork terrace backed by trees with the bay window set obliquely rather than parallel to the road. In many respects, the Blithewood gatehouse today is in a similar condition to Montgomery Place in the 1970s when the building was painted Colonial Revival white with green shutters and the view of the Hudson closed in by a green wall of secondary growth obscuring the connection to the river. As detailed in this study, the historical exterior treatment of Blithewood (the 1841 gatehouse and the main house), Montgomery Place, and Locust Grove were all very similar. All were coated with sanded paint or scored stucco to imitate a light-colored stone ashlar to provide contrast with the lush green picturesque landscapes around them. This exterior treatment imparted both color and texture to the building surfaces and

was an essential part of Davis's compositions. At Montgomery Place the exterior has been restored to Davis's original color scheme and the results are impressive.

Accordingly, the exterior of the 1841 Blithewood gatehouse should be restored to its Davis-era appearance with its period landscaping reinstated. The gatehouse is of national historical importance both as a tour-de-force of picturesque composition and as one of the earliest examples of Italianate style architecture in America. It is one of Davis's few surviving gatehouses and perhaps the only extant hexagonal one. More importantly, the 1841 gatehouse is the lynchpin of the first fully realized picturesque landscape in America.

Restoring the 1841 gatehouse will require a substantial research and analysis commitment by Bard College and partner organizations but should only represent a medium-size restoration budget since the required changes appear to be primarily cosmetic (paint colors, stucco coatings, replacement/reconstruction of selected architectural elements, landscaping).<sup>2</sup> And, given that only exterior changes are contemplated, the building could still be used to house academic offices as it is today. Key research priorities include archaeological investigations to understand the historical grading, paths, and planting around the building and a thorough architectural investigation to analyze the original coatings and paint colors, building changes and accretions, and other required work (drainage enhancements, structural support) necessary to stabilize the structure. The benefit of such a restoration reaches beyond preservation. The restored gatehouse will provide a proper introduction to Bard College and enhance the College's diverse portfolio of architecture that also includes Gilded-age mansions and Frank Gehry's dramatic Richard B. Fisher Performing Arts Center.

---

<sup>2</sup> Re-orienting the public road to align with Davis's watercolor would also be desirable but may not be feasible. The width of the entrance also must accommodate modern traffic requirements and a physical gate is incompatible with the present use. But the curved right-hand side of the stonewall should be reinstated to original configuration to draw the eye inward.

### **1b - The Pine Tree Allée**

While the gatehouse was the most prominent architectural object in Davis's entrance composition, it was only one element of the approach that also included an avenue of pine trees originally planted by General Armstrong around 1800. Some of these plantings still exist on the left-hand side of Blithewood Avenue near the gatehouse (see figure 3.24). There are also groupings of later plantings of pine trees along the right-hand-side of the drive near the present-day Blithewood mansion. But the modern visitor cannot see that all of these plantings were part of a larger scheme. Bard College should make a commitment to reinstate the allée, planting new pine trees and replacing old ones, so the original landscape design intention can be read.

### **1c - Lost Structures: the 1836 Gate House and Original Blithewood Mansion**

The 1836 gatehouse at Blithewood is justly famous as the first Gothic cottage in America and remained an important element of the Blithewood composition even after the new gatehouse was built in 1841. In 1999, the original foundations of this landmark building were discovered as part of test excavations for the Fisher Center. This raises the possibility of reconstructing the structure on the original site based on Davis's published plans and elevations in *Rural Residences* and surviving historic photographs. In the early period of the preservation movement, reconstructions of this type were routinely carried out, often with far less documentation. But the results are typically unconvincing, and read to modern eyes as ersatz, "Disneyland" history.

If the rest of the original Blithewood estate were intact, it might be justifiable to attempt a reconstruction of this building to "complete" the landscape.<sup>3</sup> But given the present location of the site in the midst of an active college campus, the result

---

<sup>3</sup> Similar reconstructions of well-documented landscape garden structures have been successfully executed in England at such prominent estates as Croome Court.

would be rather anomalous, and represent a poor investment of funds since the building is too small to house most academic functions. So reconstruction is not a recommended strategy. But this extremely important site needs to be made visible. Bard has made a start on this front by placing two markers near the site which briefly relate the re-discovery of the Gate House/Gardener's Cottage and present several images of Davis's drawings. But one does not know exactly where the gatehouse stood, how big it was, how it was oriented, what it faced. Positioning the spectator is a fundamental part of picturesque theory, and Davis's drawings show that he was acutely concerned with this issue. A recommended approach for interpreting the 1836 Blithewood gatehouse is to install flush stone pavers in the grass marking the footprint of the original building. This would not complicate the sightlines of the modern campus but it would convey a lot more information about the building to visitors by allowing them to stand inside it. Additional information and interpretation about the gatehouse could be carved onto the stones themselves.

A complementary strategy could be used for the original Blithewood mansion. My preliminary analysis of old topographical maps suggests that when Hoppin & Koen sited the new neo-Colonial mansion around 1900, they did not build it on the original house site but slightly to the north (figure 7.2).<sup>4</sup> This allowed the construction of the formal garden in front of the house.<sup>5</sup> Based on this analysis, the site of Donaldson's original Blithewood appears to be in the arrival circle of the current mansion. A recent site visit comparing the vantage point of historic photos reached a similar conclusion (figure 7.3). Archaeological analysis should be conducted to more precisely locate the foundations of the original structure.

---

<sup>4</sup> The analysis consisted of overlaying historical topographical maps from 1895 and 1934 that mark the location of the original and replacement houses in Photoshop. While admittedly rough, the results are suggestive.

<sup>5</sup> The land sloped down closer to the house at the original site.

The footprint could then be picked out with flush stones in a similar manner to the 1836 gatehouse and the arrival circular drive re-centered around it.

### **1-d - Blithewood Summary**

By adopting these four strategies, restoring the 1841 gatehouse, replanting the pine tree allée, and marking the footprints of the 1836 gate house and original Blithewood main house, Bard would be able to make large strides in making the original composition visible again. These four elements formed the spine of Davis and Donaldson's landscape design. A complementary strategy would be to develop a digital tour of this route that provided additional context about the evolution of the design and allowed visitors to download images of Davis's pencil and watercolor drawings of the property and compare them with current conditions. Over time, this could be augmented with additional elements of the landscape (e.g. - the grapery, the spring house, the pavilions) as they are rediscovered. Bard should also consider establishing a permanent museum exhibit and/or permanent signage on campus to interpret the overall history of the original Blithewood.

## **2. The Dr. Oliver Bronson House.**

The Dr. Oliver Bronson estate presents an exciting opportunity to preserve and restore a very early Davis picturesque landscape of national importance. Efforts to achieve this, however, are severely hampered by the current level of access to the site. The cultural resource manager, Historic Hudson, currently holds a thirty-year lease on only 1.2 acres of the original property, encompassing the terrace immediately around the house and the arrival loop (figure 7.4).<sup>6</sup> While many years of effort were required to obtain this lease from the state, it represent only a tiny portion of Davis's original landscape design and Bronson's total

---

<sup>6</sup> The lease also includes a right-of-way down from Worth Avenue.



landholdings of 120 acres.<sup>7</sup> Further, even within the limited territory covered by the lease, access is extremely limited. All visitors, including Historic Hudson staff, must obtain advance written permission to visit the house.

Efforts need to be made to make more of the original Davis-Bronson landscape accessible. This is consistent with local planning efforts. The recent City of Hudson Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan (LWRP) published in November 2011, articulated a long-term goal of “obtaining public access to the Plumb-Bronson House and surrounding acreage adding additional park and recreation space to that area of the city.”<sup>8</sup> The Bronson estate is part of a 162-acre parcel that represents a large portion of the undeveloped open space in the city (figure 7.5).<sup>9</sup> According to the LWRP, the State has “recently announced long term plans...to shutter the Correctional Facility” that could open the door to potential new uses including public park space and clustered residential development but goes on to note that “the State has not announced any redevelopment plans for the facility or property.”<sup>10</sup> So there is substantial uncertainty with respect to the character and timing of future development on the larger property around Dr. Bronson’s house. This uncertainty complicates long-term planning by both Historic Hudson and the City of Hudson. While a variety of future land

---

<sup>7</sup> In addition, because the adjoining area below the knoll on which the house is sited is used seasonally as a firing range by the correctional facility, active preservation/restoration work on the house and grounds is limited to a narrow window between June 30 and early November.

<sup>8</sup> *City of Hudson Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan* (New York: BFJ Planning, 2011), 32.

<sup>9</sup> The state parcel is somewhat larger than Bronson’s original estate of 120 acres but largely overlaps it. The original state institution, the New York House of Refuge for Women, was developed on an adjacent parcel of approximately 42 acres to the west and then went on to purchase the former Bronson estate in 1915 creating the current 162 acre site.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

ownership scenarios are possible for the larger parcel, the near term need is securing access to a much smaller portion of this property.

The National Historic Landmark (NHL) Nomination Report designated an approximately fifty-acre portion of Dr. Bronson's original estate as part of the landmark (figure 7.6). This NHL-designated acreage comprises lawns and wood surrounding the house, the 1839 stable complex to the southeast, and the entrance and drive on Worth Avenue. This reflects the core of Dr. Bronson's original landscape garden. In the words of the report, "the nominated acreage provides an appropriate context for the house and outbuildings and may likewise yield information regarding the estate's mid-nineteenth century layout and appearance."<sup>11</sup> The NHL-designated acreage is largely isolated from the operations of the correctional facility that lies to the west of the house screened from view by trees. As such, this area should serve as the focus of landscape preservation efforts for Historic Hudson.

## **2a - Understanding the Davis Landscape**

Unlike the other properties covered in this study that are richly documented by period sources, the landscape design that Davis and Bronson created in 1839 and which evolved over the Bronson period of ownership (1838-54) is only partially understood. No period site plan is currently available to preservationists and no Davis drawings of the 1839 design campaign are known to survive even though Davis's Day Book notes that he created a "landscape view" of the completed design in December of 1839 (see Chapter 4). It is unknown what, if any changes to the landscape design were made when Davis returned in 1849 to design the Italianate tower addition. Major questions exist about the location of the original drives and path systems, the historical grading around the house, the

---

<sup>11</sup> William Krattinger, *Dr. Oliver Bronson House National Historic Landmark Nomination Report* (Albany: New York State Office of Parks & Recreation, 1997), 26.

boundaries between pleasure ground and working parts of the landscape, the location of ornamental outbuildings and rustic seats, the pattern of open fields and wooded areas, and the historical viewsheds looking inward and outward. While a complete understanding of all of the features of Davis and Bronson's original design may not be possible, the key elements should be discoverable through additional archaeological and historical analysis.

The non-profit needs to obtain permission from the state to conduct investigations in key areas of the NHL-nominated acreage outside the current lease area in the near term, prior to any future potential changes in ownership. This information can be used to guide future land acquisitions/leases and help protect key features of the original design through easements or protective covenants. Without a more detailed inventory of the primary landscape, Historic Hudson will not be in a position to effectively advocate for the protection of these features. None of this is incompatible with the potential future use of the Bronson estate as a public park. But there is a big difference between a park that preserves the spatial relationships, circulation, and plantings of Davis's original picturesque landscape composition and an unsympathetic modern park design. Key analysis priorities are discussed below:

## **2b - Rediscovering the Davis Approach**

As has been discussed frequently in this study, the arrival sequence is a key part of picturesque theory and Davis's compositions. In Chapter 5 (see figure 5.23), a potential route was identified for the 1839 approach to the house based on a preliminary landscape study conducted by Robert Toole in 2000. Archaeological analysis needs to be conducted in the area of the "abandoned drive" at the edge of the lawn east of the house to determine the dating and material composition of this section of the drive and map the overall route of the approach during both the Plumb and Bronson eras. This will provide a blueprint to eventually restore the drive to its original path and appearance in the future.

## **2c - Documenting the Stable Complex**

Davis's 1839 bracketed stable represents a rare and historically important architectural survival. The evidence also suggests that this complex of buildings played a pivotal role in the 1839 landscape composition framing an extensive viewshed of the Catskills and Hudson River to the west. Very little is known about the evolution of this complex (figure 7.7). What elements date to the 1839 campaign? What elements were added later or changed over time? One intriguing possibility is that one or more of the smaller barn structures represent a re-use by Davis of Samuel Plumb's flanking dependencies in the original Federal period design. Barns were commonly moved by teams of oxen during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Davis's portfolio amply shows his predilection for adaptively reusing existing structures. Another possibility is that the main barn itself pre-dated the Bronson occupancy. Perhaps this barn reflects another of Davis's "picturesque transformations" of an existing structure. His Day Book mentions that he created "sketches for stables and barn ornament" but does not indicate whether these were new structures.<sup>12</sup> Another major unknown about the stable complex is the original color scheme. Although the complex is currently painted a conventional barn red, this is unlikely Davis's choice. A detailed architectural investigation of this complex is needed to answer these and other questions and provide a road map for the future stabilization and restoration of this complex.

## **2d - Documenting the "Appletree Cottage"**

At the south edge of the property is a modified late eighteenth century cottage that was historically part of the Bronson property (figure 7.8). This structure was listed as "non-contributing" and excluded from the NHL-nominated acreage due to its lower level of integrity. But this structure was originally part of both the

---

<sup>12</sup> Davis, Day Book, Vol. 1, 197.

Plumb and Bronson estates and forms an important part of the historical and current viewshed.<sup>13</sup> When Samuel Plumb's property was subdivided during the ownership of Robert Frary (1835-1838), the farmhouse and associated outbuildings was separated from the estate that Dr. Bronson purchased. It is noteworthy that Dr. Bronson later purchased this farmhouse and additional twenty-nine acres in 1849, the same year A.J. Davis returned for the second transformation of the Bronson house. This suggests an aesthetic impulse to control an important part of the landscape composition as well a practical desire to add more acreage. At Locust Grove, Henry W. Livingston's original eighteenth-century farmhouse was retained by Morse and Davis as a picturesque element in the approach to the house.<sup>14</sup> The Appletree cottage is likely to have performed a similar role in the Davis/Bronson design. More information is needed about the "Appletree" cottage; including an assessment of whether it should be included in future landscape restoration planning.

## **2e - Historic Tree Inventory**

On April 9, 1839, a week before Davis's first working visit to the Bronson estate, Dr. Bronson purchased \$93.00 of trees from the nursery of C. and A. J. Downing.<sup>15</sup> This reflected a substantial purchase at the time. According to landscape historian Robert Toole, this figure represented approximately 200

---

<sup>13</sup> The farmhouse is clearly visible from the east veranda of the main house creating a picturesque outline at the edge of a rise across the intervening open meadow.

<sup>14</sup> Similar strategies were pursued at many other picturesque estates on the Hudson. For example at Frederic Church's Olana, also located in Hudson, NY, the original Anglo-Dutch farmhouse was woven into the composition of Church's circa 1860 landscape.

<sup>15</sup> Krattinger, 18.

trees.<sup>16</sup> Downing's involvement with the project is historically important. But the knowledge that a large number of trees were planted in 1839 is also useful in understanding the original landscape-planting pattern. As prior reports have indicated, many of the original plantings from both the Plumb and Bronson era still survive in the landscape. Historic Hudson should commission a survey that maps the locations of historic trees surviving on the NHL-designated acreage (not just around the house). This information, in conjunction with analysis of original locations of the drives can be used to help visualize the original site plan.

## **2f - Reframing Davis's 1849-50 Landscape View**

Davis's watercolor and pencil landscape views provide a clear delineation of his design intentions, even if some of the plantings or features were not executed. As such, when available, they should serve as primary reference points for landscape and building restoration. In 1850, A.J. Davis sketched the new Bronson House west façade and tower in the landscape. Comparing this drawing to existing conditions shows how much the current view has closed in with secondary growth and plantings (figure 7.9). Davis's view should be used as a guide to remove trees in this area. In addition, the non-original stone patio and fieldstone wall in the former lawn area added during the twentieth century period of institutional ownership should be documented and removed.

## **2g - Opening up the Original Hudson River Viewsheds**

At the Bronson House, the primary western viewshed of the Hudson River and Mount Merino to the west seen in William Wall's 1820 watercolor (figure 4.3) has largely been closed in the area around the house, obscuring a major part of how this house was meant to be experienced. A key priority should be to selectively clear or thin the trees on the slope below the knoll on which the house sits. This

---

<sup>16</sup> Robert Toole, *Plumb-Bronson House Preliminary Landscape Study* (Saratoga Springs: The Office of R.M. Toole, 2000), 3.

land currently is outside of the boundaries of the property controlled by the non-profit and will require negotiation with the state institutions that administer the site (the New York State Office of General Services) and the adjoining correctional facility.

## **2h - Documenting Historic Grading and Path Systems around the House**

Samuel Plumb sited his new house on a natural knoll that was developed as lawn terrace. It is unknown how much re-grading of this terrace occurred as part of Davis's 1839 transformation of this house. But Davis's landscape view of the 1849 tower addition (see figure 7.9) strongly suggests that he specified that the earth be built up around the new addition, forming a plinth that heightened the monumentality of the new tower. This is consistent with his approach at Locust Grove where an earthwork berm was built around the new addition and vines trained onto the trellises creating the picturesque effect of the architecture literally growing out of the ground.

As was the custom in New York State during the Federal period, Samuel Plumb's original kitchen was located below grade underneath the semi-octagonal end of the southwest parlor. A.J. Davis retained this below-grade service area arrangement at the Bronson House.<sup>17</sup> During the post-Civil War period, a later owner added a new above-grade kitchen addition mimicking the semi-octagonal form of the other bays on the south side of the house. This would have required substantial re-grading and a disruption of the carriage loop that is presumed to have run around the house during at least part of the Davis era.<sup>18</sup> Also during

---

<sup>17</sup> Unlike Andrew Jackson Downing whose published designs often featured above grade kitchen ells, Davis's villa floor plans almost always retained the traditional below-grade arrangement that kept service areas out of the landscape. He was very concerned, however, with providing additional light and air to these spaces to make them comfortable.

<sup>18</sup> It is unknown whether the carriage loop extended around to the river front of the house at the time of the 1839 redesign campaign since this was the un-

the later nineteenth century, a brick tunnel of unknown function was added below grade southeast of the new kitchen addition. The entrance to this tunnel was later reinforced with concrete when the new patio and stonewall were added by the state during the early part of the twentieth century. The result of all of these later developments is an exceedingly confusing jumble of masses and grade changes on the south side of the house that severely degrades A.J. Davis's vision (figure 7.10).

The historic grades and circulation around the house need to be investigated by Historic Hudson to understand the original connection between the house and landscape in Davis's composition. Archaeological analysis needs to be conducted on both the south side of the house where the grade disturbance is the most severe but also in selected locations underneath the modern stone patio west of the house (prior to its removal) and north of the house (where a remnant of a concrete sidewalk exists) to understand the overall historical circulation (carriage drives and pedestrian walkways) in both the Plumb and Bronson eras. Archaeological analysis should also be conducted to locate the foundations of the original Plumb-era flanking dependencies.

## **2i - Removal of Later Additions and Regrading**

Following the archaeological analysis, the later kitchen addition and tunnel should be documented and an approximate construction date identified. Assuming that these structures can be dated after the primary historical period of significance identified in the NHL report (1839-1850), these later additions, which completely disrupt Davis's careful composition of building volumes and topography, should be removed. The Davis-era grading should be then reinstated.

---

improved, private part of the house. But the 1849 addition reoriented the floorplan to the river, creating a new front door and entrance hall (the octagonal gallery). If it was not already in place, this would have prompted an extension of the carriage drive around the house



## **2j - Restoring the Original Color Scheme**

In Davis's painterly compositions, house coloration and texture were always important considerations. At Montgomery Place, the 1844 building contract for Davis's initial transformation of the house called for the house to be painted to look exactly like stone" using paint that was "well sanded."<sup>19</sup> At Blithewood, Davis's watercolor of the view outward from the verandah (figure 3.14) shows that the carved leaf drops at the roofline were picked out in dark green paint. At the Bronson House, evidence of sanded paint was found on shingles and traces of dark green paint were uncovered on the egg and dart vergeboard and the eave brackets in recent restoration work (figure 7.11). Historic Hudson should undertake a comprehensive exterior paint analysis to determine the complete Davis-era historical paint scheme. When the restoration works on the main house is completed, the house and verandahs should be repainted with the original color scheme.

## **2k- Dr. Oliver Bronson House Summary**

Most of recommended strategies for Bronson property involve additional research and analysis into the larger landscape in which the house is set. This will achieve two important benefits: greater understanding of Davis and Bronson's overall composition and critical information to be able to protect this landscape from potentially unsympathetic changes tied to the redevelopment of the surrounding parcel in the future. Other recommendations such as opening up the viewshed, and reinstating the connection of the house to the landscape on the south side of the house, will have a more immediate benefit, and support the ongoing restoration of the main structure.

---

<sup>19</sup> *Montgomery Place, National Historic Landscape Report* (Tarrytown: Historic Hudson Valley, 1990), section 7, page 3.

### **3. Montgomery Place**

Montgomery Place is, along with Frederic Church's Olana (circa 1860-1890), one of the pre-eminent surviving landscape gardens on the Hudson River. The estate is remarkably intact, having been handed down through many generations of the Livingston family. During late 1980s and early 1990s, both the architecture and landscape of Montgomery Place were painstakingly restored. Careful attention was paid to many of the important features of Davis's composition as well as the gardens of early twentieth century owners. River views were re-opened using Davis's 1847 watercolor landscape views as a basis. The house's original "sky outline" was restored by removing later additions and reproducing lost architectural details, and Davis's original sanded paint treatment re-applied. In recent years, the major Davis designed outbuildings including the carriage barn (1861) and Swiss Cottage (1867) have also been carefully restored. In 2009, Montgomery Place received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for a project entitled "American Arcadia" designed to reinterpret Montgomery Place. Interpretative signs have been newly installed in the landscape telling the story of important elements of the landscape design including the 1841 preservation covenant between Louise Livingston and Robert Donaldson discussed in Chapter 3. These efforts have collectively made Montgomery Place one of the most satisfying places to fully experience a mature picturesque landscape. Despite all of this important work, however, significant opportunities exist to make Davis' composition more present without disrupting interpretation of other historical layers

#### **3a - Named Historical Walks and Paths**

As part of the landscape reinterpretation effort at Montgomery Place, trails are being repaired and views re-established. Unfortunately, no attempt has been yet made to link the trails explicitly with their Davis- era names and routes.

Downing's 1847 article *The Horticulturalist* "A Visit to Montgomery Place"

described in detail the route through the “morning walk,” “the wilderness,” and past the “lake,” “the cascade” and back to the “conservatory.”<sup>20</sup> Currently, none of these features other than the lake are included on a published map of Montgomery Place (figure 7.12). Current trail path systems should be carefully compared against archival maps and photos, and landscape studies, and paths re-aligned with their historical routes.<sup>21</sup>

The first step is to overlay the Davis/Barton-era routes, and the approximate locations of the Davis’s rustic shelter, seats and temples on to the landscape maps and other publications produced for visitors. A second step would be to create a digital I-Phone application, as Historic Hudson Valley has produced for some of its other properties, that provided a walking tour of the grounds based on A.J. Downing’s 1847 article in *The Horticulturalist*.

### **3b - Interpreting the Sawkill and Restoring the Lake**

The Sawkill gorge was the single most important element of the Davis and Barton conversation about the landscape. It was created by a landmark preservation pact between Robert Donaldson and Louise Livingston, it connected the two most important landscape gardens on the Hudson River during the time period, and it provided Davis and the Bartons the greatest creative opportunity to paint dramatic landscape scenes incorporating trees, water, light, and rustic architecture. It would have been wonderful to explore, as Davis and Downing did, this landscape in its prime, with its many “incidents,” and walk across the rustic bridge separating Blithewood and Montgomery Place.

---

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, “A Visit to Montgomery Place” in *The Horticulturalist*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Oct 1847), 245-260.

<sup>21</sup> The landscape architect and historian Robert M. Toole has already published reconstructed views of the circa 1840s Montgomery Place landscape in his book *Landscape Gardens on the Hudson* (Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press, 2010) which has served as an important resource for this study.

Unfortunately, reconstructing the rustic bridge probably is not a feasible option given security and safety issues associated with Bard College.<sup>22</sup> Other historical layers and modern realities also complicate fully restoring this landscape. During the early twentieth century, John Delafield created a hydroelectric power station for the estate, utilizing the waterpower of the Sawkill as General Armstrong's mills had before it, to create electrical power for the estate. The dams associated with these projects have changed the path of the Sawkill somewhat. Today, remains from this facility are interpreted by Montgomery Place as an important part of the history of the property. Lastly, the mouth of the Sawkill opens on to the Tivoli South Bay Wildlife Management Area, an important estuarial conservation resource. This limits the amount of disturbance to the shoreline around the Sawkill.

One important landscape feature that could be restored and interpreted is the lake that is still extant. A former millpond in the Armstrong era, the lake was turned into an elaborate *mise en scène* by Davis and Cora Barton during the 1840s (figure 7.13). The lake should be dredged and replanted to reestablish its appearance during the Davis era.<sup>23</sup> A bench could be used to temporarily mark the position of the rustic pavilion on the peninsula, which could later be reconstructed when funds are available.

### **3c - Rustic Pavilions and Shore Seats**

While Montgomery Place reads as an impressive nineteenth century picturesque landscape, it does not necessarily read as a Davis picturesque landscape. A key element in Davis's original design was a network of fanciful rustic pavilions and "shore seats" that framed the view of the Hudson and the view back across the

---

<sup>22</sup> It should be possible, however, to locate the footings of the original bridge, which could then be interpreted.

<sup>23</sup> This would require coordination with New York DEC to ensure that the fragile eco-system in the South Bay is not damaged by dredging operations.

rolling main lawn back to the house (figure 7.14). Davis provided numerous views and plans of these constructions, which incorporated bark, old tree roots, and other natural material as embellishments harkening back to the long landscape gardening tradition of rustic-work and “fabrique.” These structures should be reconstructed over time on the grounds on their original sites using Davis’s drawings as a guide. This would complete the picture for the visitor sitting on the semi-octagonal Davis south pavilion or standing on the lawn. As a preliminary step, Montgomery Place could locate the approximate location of each structure in the landscape and mark it with a bench.

### **3d - Montgomery Place Summary**

Montgomery Place is an especially satisfying picturesque landscape experience that offers many lessons for other landscape restoration projects in the Hudson Valley. The experience of this landscape could be heightened and completed, however, with the small number of changes designed to make the Davis-Barton landscape more visible. Many of the recommended strategies could be accomplished with landscape interpretation only but they would be far more satisfying with the judicious physical reconstruction of some of Davis’s rustic structures that frame the scene. And Andrew Jackson Downing would make a marvelous tour guide for an I-phone ramble through the restored Montgomery Place landscape, recreating the experience of his 1847 visit.

## **4. Locust Grove**

Locust Grove exists today as a publicly accessible house museum and landscape due to the generosity of Annette Innis Young, who bequeathed the house and endowment during the 1970s. Today, the estate is mainly interpreted to the period of the Young family ownership (1895-1975) and is furnished with many of the nearly fifteen thousand objects of furniture and decorative arts from the Young’s original collection. Biographical information about Samuel F.B. Morse is

included in the Museum Pavilion housed in the new Visitor Center. The introductory video also describes the creation of Morse's landscape garden. But it is difficult to read the Morse-Davis conversation in the grounds themselves. Below are a series of recommended strategies to make this landscape composition present for visitors today.

#### **4a - Reclaiming the Original Approach Drive**

When the new Visitor Center was opened in 2001, the entry to the estate and parking lot were moved to the south.<sup>24</sup> The original approach and carriage loop still exist, but somewhat stranded in the landscape (figure 7.15). One does not get a sense of the careful arrival sequence that Davis and Morse designed so that "an infinite variety of picturesque beauty be presented to the exercised mind."<sup>25</sup> The current tours begin at the mansion and convey mainly a description of the architectural transformation of the house and furnishings. The visitor is then allowed to roam around the grounds, retracing the route back to the Visitors Center. Only then does one realize that one is walking on the original approach drive.

Davis and Morse's sophisticated composition began with an initial glimpse of the tower and the old farmhouse as seen in Lossing's engraving (figure 7.16). As the viewer proceeded down the relatively straight approach, the glimpses of the tower grew in size heightening the picturesque perspectival effect. The current path system connects directly with the carriage loop, completely eliminating this part of the experience. Also the new path connection is not differentiated in material from the original loop so it is unclear what is historic and what is new.

---

<sup>24</sup> This undoubtedly reflected a desire to be deferential to the original landscape by siting the new development to the side of the historic landscape.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from A.J. Davis to S.F.B. Morse dated September 1, 1852. Library of Congress.

The Davis-Morse approach needs to be properly interpreted and made present again. By beginning the journey to the main house closer to the beginning of the drive, more of the original intent can be experienced.<sup>26</sup> There are a variety of ways to accomplish this. The simplest and least costly way is simply to begin the tours at the Visitors Center and lead the visitors down the original approach drive. A more compelling and permanent way to return use to the approach drive is to reconnect the path from the parking lot to the drive closer to the original entrance and eliminate the current connection (figure 7.17).<sup>27</sup> This strategy would still preserve the circulation to the Young-era garden beds.

#### **4b - Marking the Farmhouse**

In both the Montgomery and Morse eras, Henry W. Livingston's stone farmhouse was part of the original drive sited on the north side of the carriage drive. Following the strategy proposed at Blithewood, foundations for this structure should be located using archaeological analysis and the original building footprint marked in the grass with flush stone pavers.

#### **4c - Restoring Original Stucco Coatings**

Davis's September 1, 1852 letter to Morse described in Chapter 6 contained a reference to completing the newly transformed Locust Grove with a coat of specially prepared natural cement plaster applied by Davis's favorite contractor who was in the area.<sup>28</sup> The current stucco coating on the tower of Locust Grove was applied by the Young's around 1900 and restored during the 1970s. During the 1990s, a section of the original Davis-era coatings were uncovered beneath

---

<sup>26</sup> This strategy does entail some consideration of additional screening closer to the main road.

<sup>27</sup> This path segment should be differentiated in material and width from the main carriage drive so that it reads as a secondary feature.

<sup>28</sup> Sept 1, 1852 Letter from A.J. Davis to S.F.B. Morse.

wainscot in the transition between the tower and the original Federal period house. According to Ray Armater, former site director of Locust Grove (and current director of Montgomery Place), the original plaster surface was much smoother than the current application and was scored to imitate stone like Davis's schemes at Blithewood and Montgomery Place.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the exposed portion of the original house had been coated with sand paint like these other examples. This surviving section of Davis-era historic fabric could be used to create a more accurate restoration of Davis's original composition in which texture as well as color was important elements of the picturesque effect.

#### **4d - Trellised Vines**

Davis's watercolor drawings and historic photos all show the tower and verandah of Locust Grove embowered with vines (figure 7.18). This was a major part of the Italian villa character of the design. Locust Grove should consider reinstating vines on the tower to better reflect Morse and Davis's artistic intent. While climbing plants can damage masonry walls if not properly monitored and maintained, there are ways to isolate vines from the building surface using a secondary matrix and less invasive species are available. At Washington Irving's nearby Sunnyside, Historic Hudson Valley has successfully maintained vines on the picturesque cottage over an extended period so direct institutional experience is available. Another relevant museum site is the Alice Austin House on Staten Island that has trained multiple varieties of non-invasive vines across the restored picturesque porch.

#### **4e - Restoring the Historical Viewshed**

Davis's views provide a record of the intended "aspect" and character of the house in the landscape. Equal attention needs to be paid to preserving/restoring the primary "prospects," or viewsheds of these landscapes. At Locust Grove,

---

<sup>29</sup> Ray Aramater, e-mail message to author, April 24, 2012.



Samuel F. B. Morse, created a relatively open landscape garden on the rectangular piece of land below the bluff up to the riverfront. He also screened the railroad with a belt of trees. This view was designed to be seen from the vantage point of the lawn terrace and was framed by denser grouping of trees along the property borders (see figure 6.32).

Today this viewshed has been closed in with secondary growth and only a small slot connecting the landscape to the river (see figure 6.34). Currently, this section of the property is operated as a nature preserve and used for active recreation. The current two-hundred-acre Locust Grove property is considerably larger than Morse's historical seventy-six -acre estate based on purchases of the adjoining Southwood and Edgell estates in recent years. The current trail system is also more curvilinear and covers more territory than its historical counterpart (figure 7.19). This presents an opportunity to both reframe Morse's original landscape garden while still reserving habitat for the nature preserve (figure 7.20). The borders of Morse's landscape garden could be reestablished with new plantings, and over time the original pattern of plantings, stonewalls, and path systems restored. The Olana Partnership in Hudson, New York, has recently funded and executed a similar larger-scale landscape restoration of Frederic Church's design.

#### **4g - Locust Grove Summary**

While the main house at Locust Grove is relatively well preserved and maintained the Davis-Morse era picturesque landscape is not currently legible. Efforts to make this landscape present should be begin by reclaiming the original approach. The main house today reflects the exterior appearance of the Young era rather than Morse and Davis's original aesthetic choices. The introduction of more appropriate stucco on the tower coupled with the reintroduction would also greatly improve the connection to Morse and Davis' original composition without altering current interpretation significantly. The most significant opportunity for making Morse and Davis's vision real again, however, is

opening up the original viewshed and replanting the landscape garden on the land below the terrace. The proposed approach would still retain substantial acreage as nature preserves and would not change the current pattern of recreational use. The proposed changes could also be phased in over time as staff and resources are available.

## Conclusion

As many scholars have noted, Alexander Jackson Davis was influenced by the English Picturesque. But as the projects analyzed in this study have demonstrated, Davis's understanding and use of this tradition was different and more extensive than has been typically understood. It was the eighteenth- and not the nineteenth-century English landscape gardening tradition that shaped Davis's work and his primary theoretical reference point was Humphry Repton not Andrew Jackson Downing. Davis's early introduction to this earlier tradition of the Picturesque through Samuel F.B. Morse and other artists of the Hudson River School, provides an essential link to understanding Davis self-conceptualization as "architectural composer" and the specific way he approached his commissions at Blithewood, the Bronson estate, Montgomery Place and Locust Grove.

Our understanding of the evolution of these projects is greatly enhanced by viewing them through the lense of landscape gardening. In these commissions, A.J. Davis worked as a landscape gardener himself, collaborating with sophisticated clients who were also inspired by this English tradition to create an artful blend of Nature and Architecture that reflected the Hudson Valley genius loci. Understanding Davis in this way changes the preservation priorities at these important historic sites. Landscape restoration assumes an equal position with architectural restoration. And because Davis saw landscape and architecture as one, these two avenues of restoration and preservation can and, indeed, should be pursued as one.

Figure 7.1



Blithewood 1841 Gatehouse, Summer 2011. Image: Peter Watson.



A.J. Davis. Landscape View of Gatehouse. 1841. Avery (1955.001.00042).

Figure 7.2



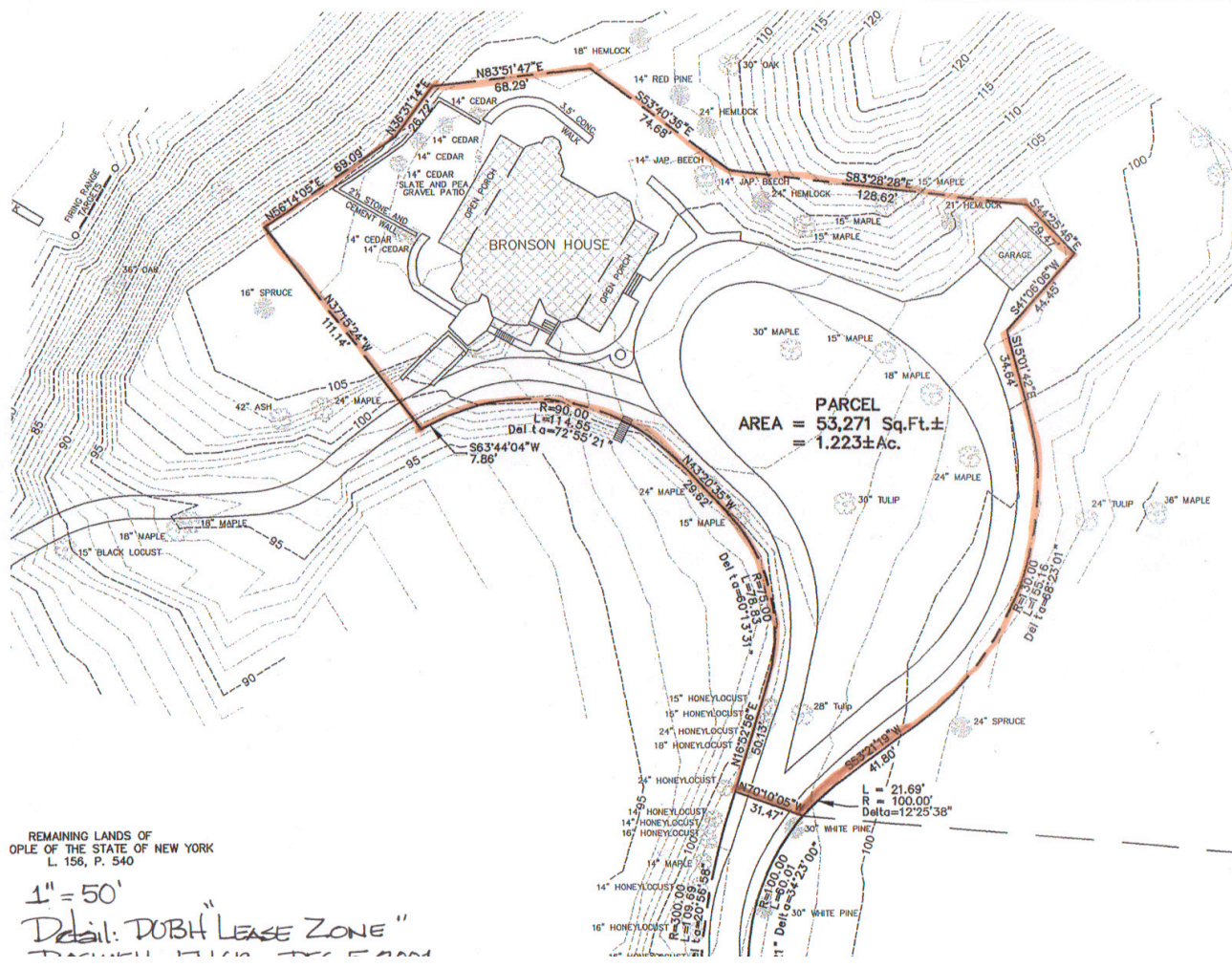
2012 USGIS Aerial photo of Bard College with approximate location of original Blithewood structures. Peter Watson.

Figure 7.3



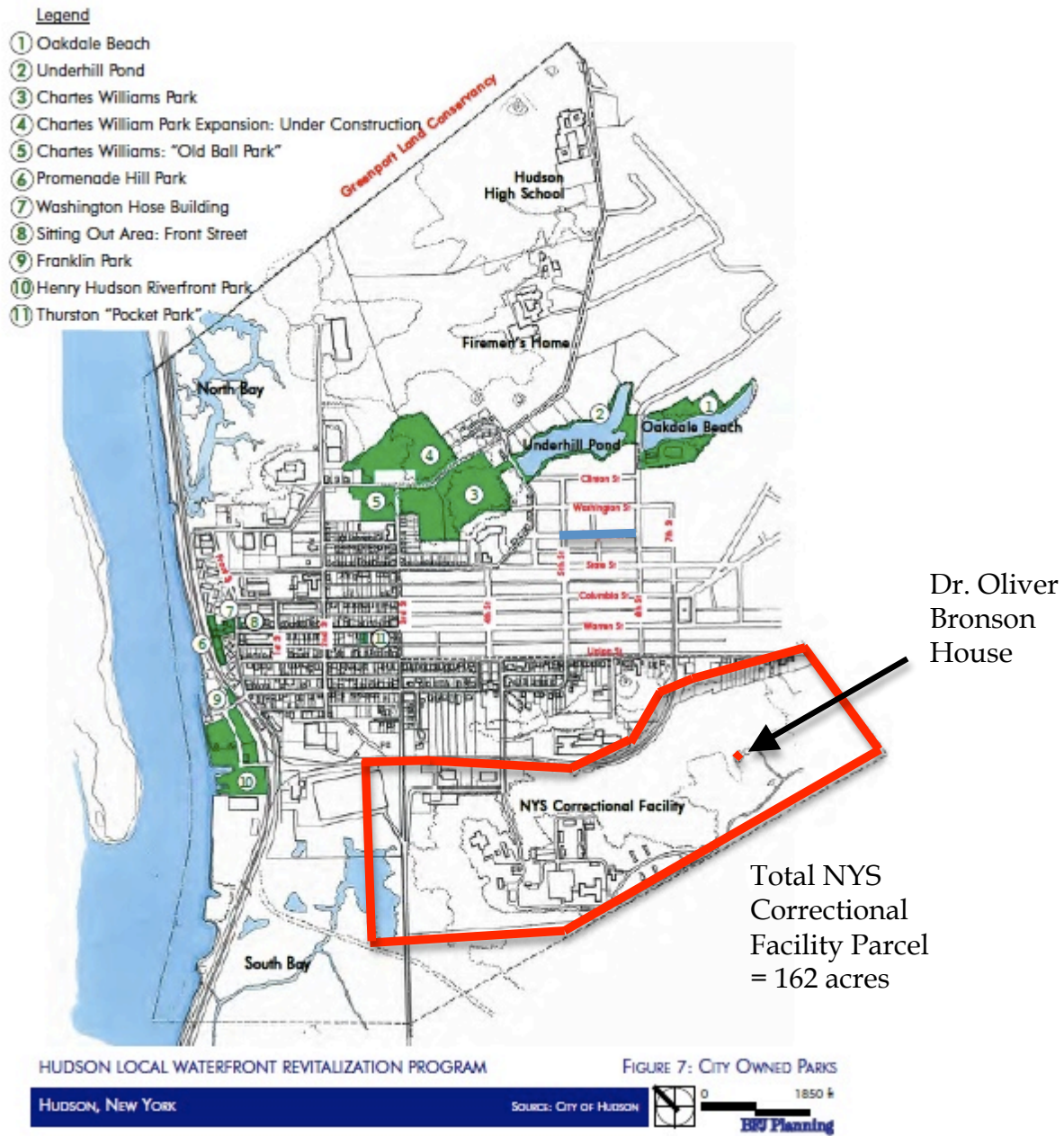
Potential location of original Blithewood Mansion. Image: Peter Watson.

Figure 7.4



Survey of Dr. Oliver Bronson House Survey Map. Courtesy of Historic Hudson.

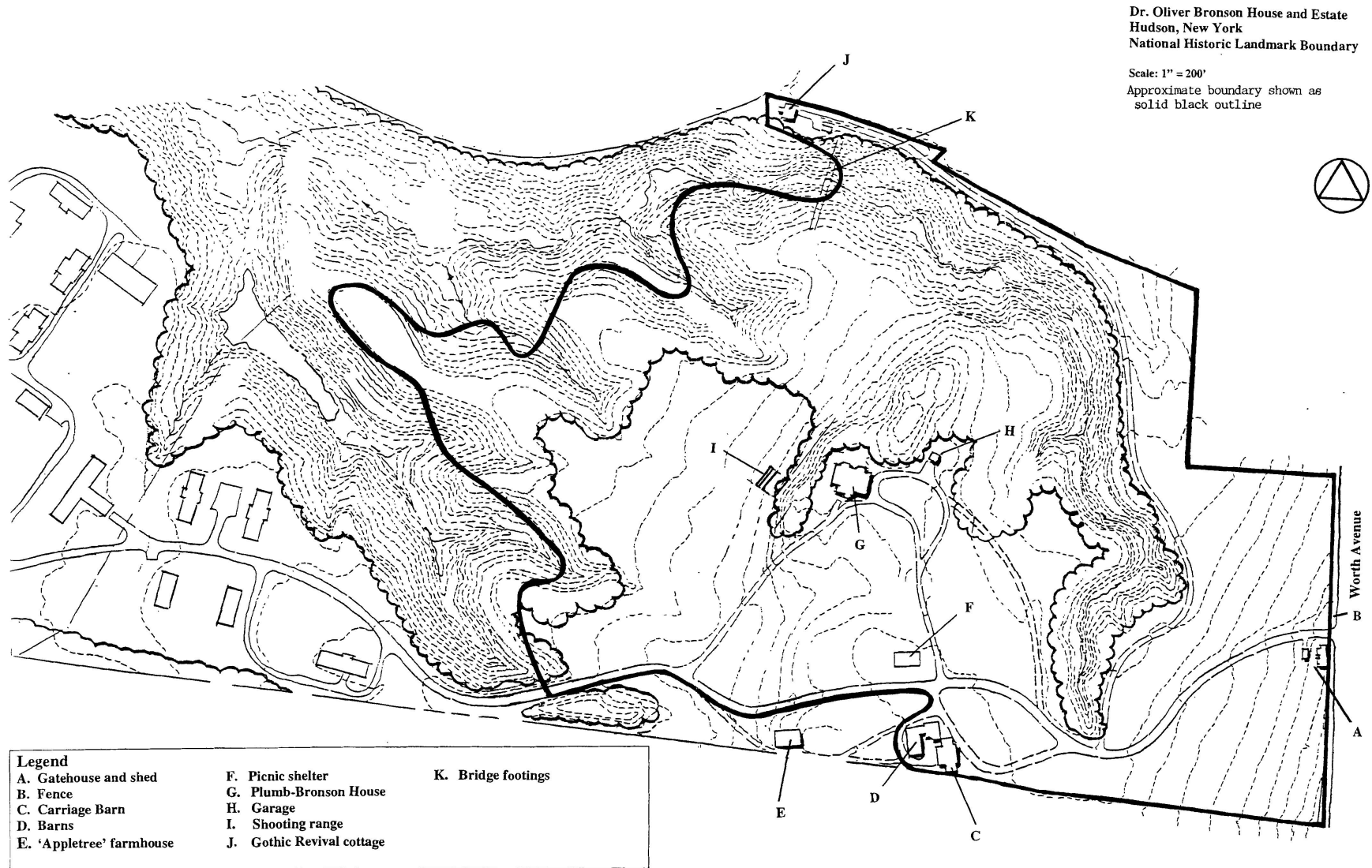
Figure 7.5



City of Hudson. Existing Recreation areas., Hudson LWRP 2011, BFJ Planning.



Figure 7.6



National Historic Landmark Acreage. Dr. Oliver Bronson House NHL Nomination Report. 1997.

Figure 7.7



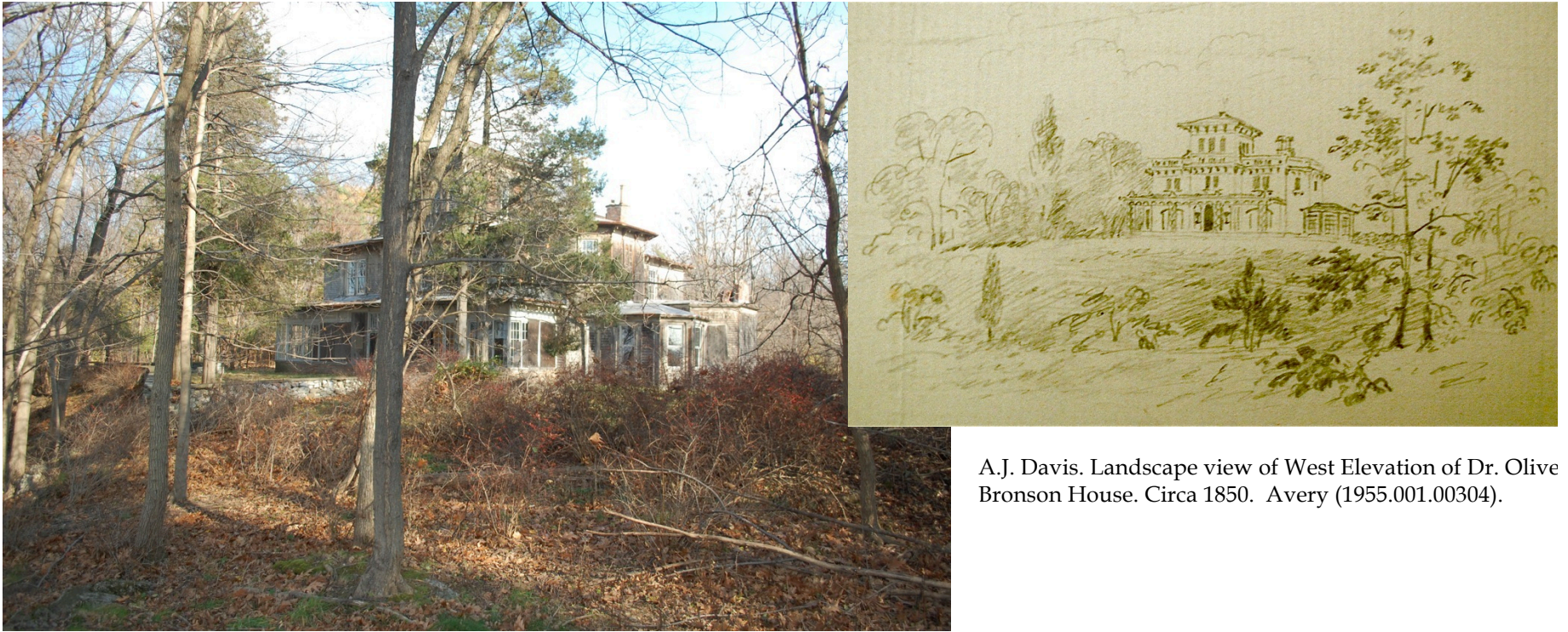
A.J. Davis. 1839 Bronson Estate Stable Complex. Image: Peter Watson.

Figure 7.8



“Appletree cottage” on southern border of original Bronson property line. Image: Peter Watson.

Figure 7.9



A.J. Davis. Landscape view of West Elevation of Dr. Olive Bronson House. Circa 1850. Avery (1955.001.00304).

Dr. Oliver Bronson House. View of West Elevation. November 2011. Image: Peter Watson.

Figure 7.10



South Elevation of the Dr. Oliver Bronsohn House, November 2011. Image: Peter Watson.

Figure 7.11



Detail of egg-and-dart vergeboard showing traces of green paint. Image: Peter Watson.



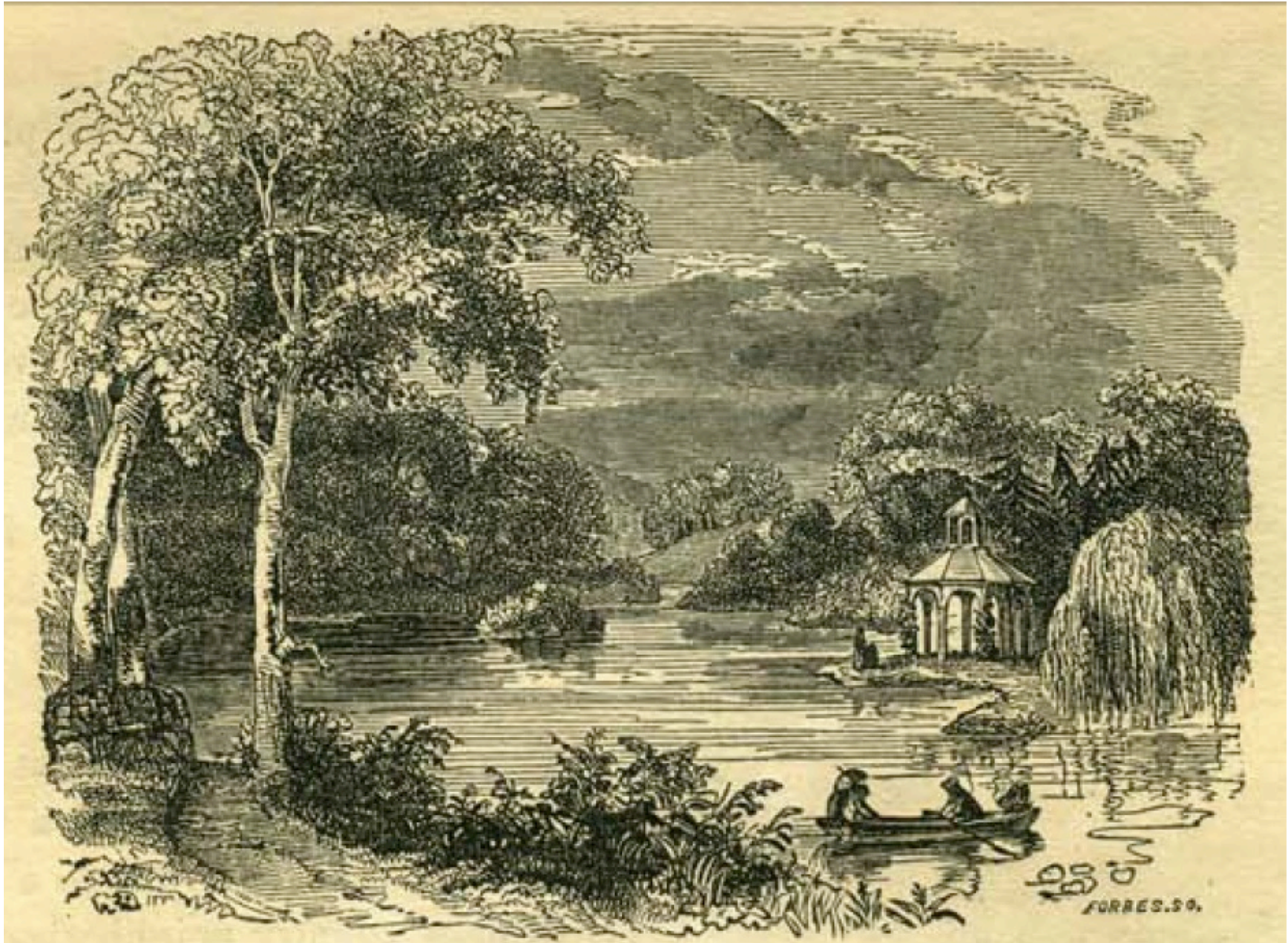
Bracket from tower roof showing traces of green paint. Image: Peter Watson

Figure 7.12



Montgomery Place Landscape and Gardens Visitor Map. 2012. Historic Hudson Valley.

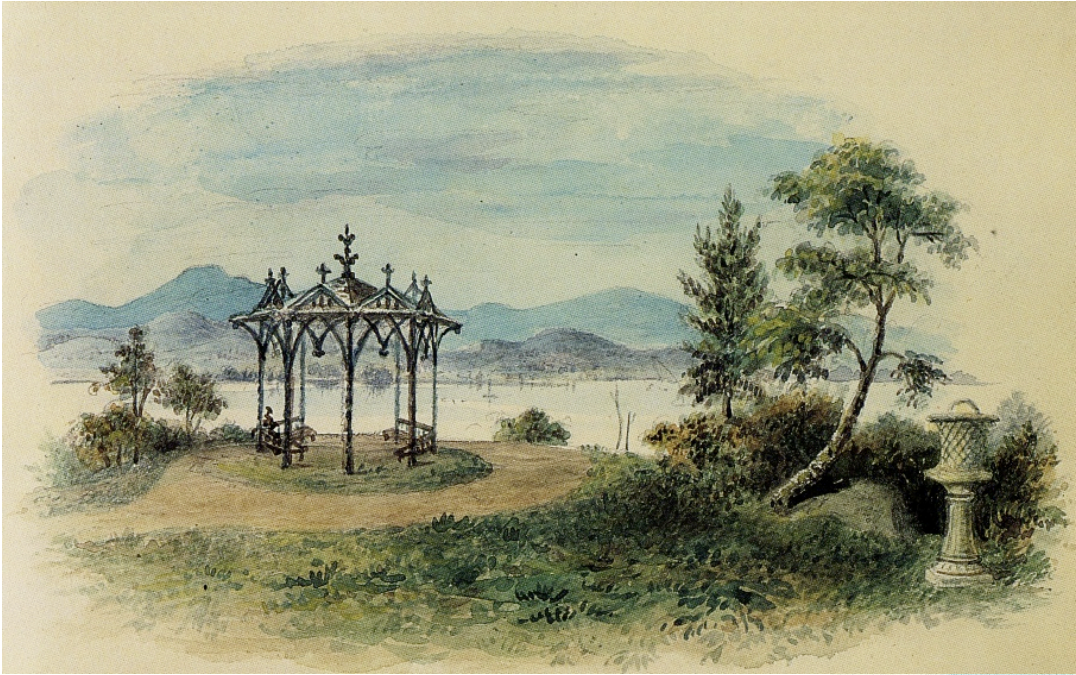
Figure 7.13



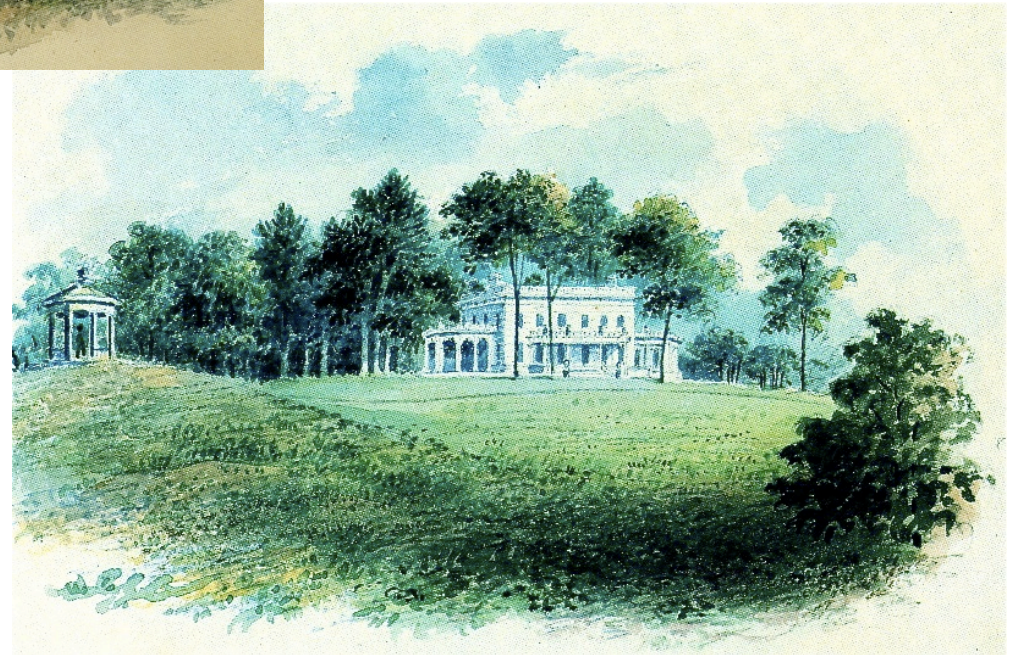
A.J. Davis. View of the Lake with Pavilion from "A Visit to Montgomery Place," *The Horticulturalist*, October 1847.



Figure 7.14



A.J. Davis. View of Rustic Pavilion at Montgomery Place from lawn, circa 1847. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.



A.J. Davis. View of West Elevation of Montgomery Place from lawn, circa 1847. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

Figure 7.15



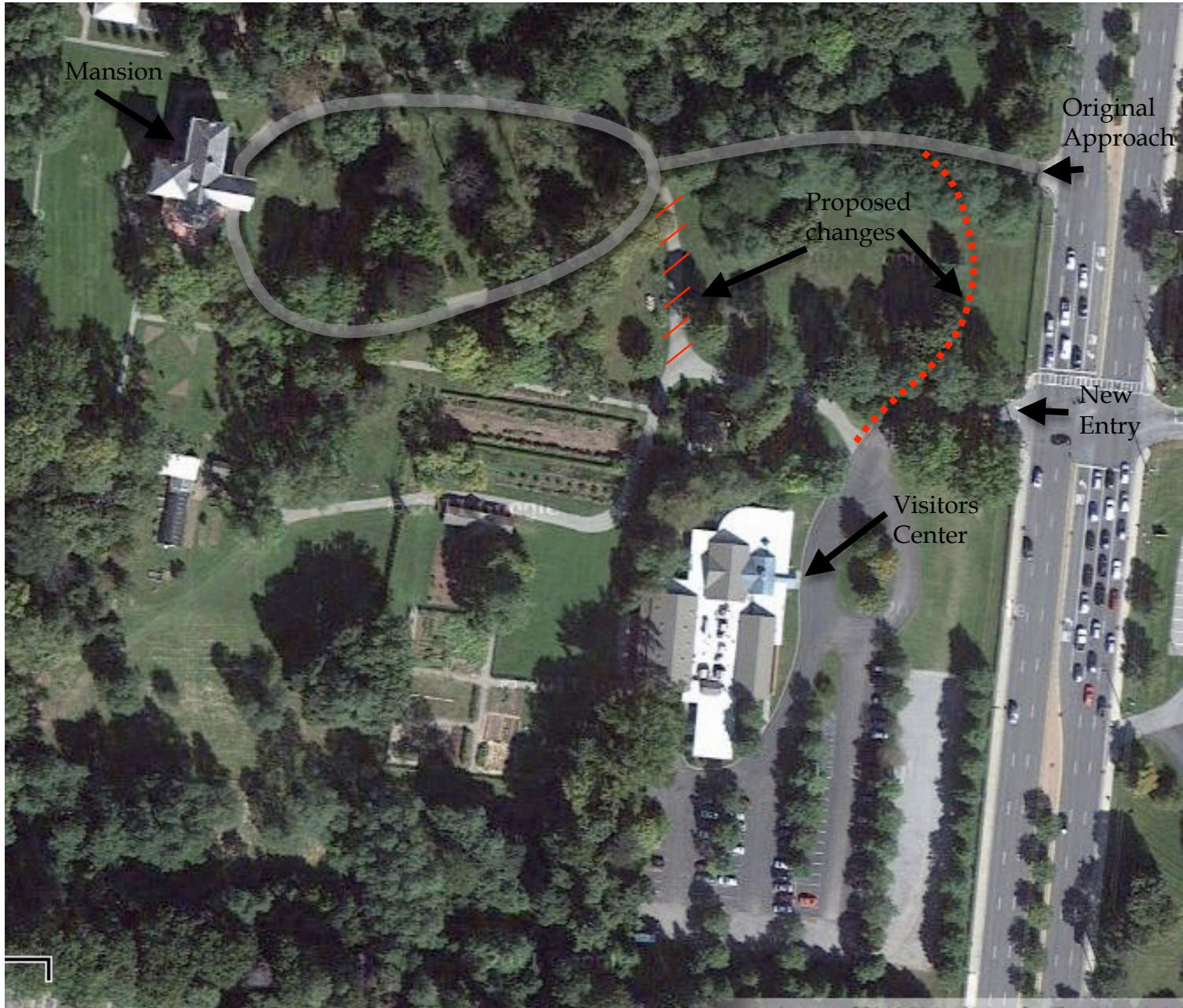
Aerial view of existing and proposed circulation at Locust Grove. Google Maps.

Figure 7.16



Benson J. Lossing. "Locust Grove" from *The Hudson, from the wilderness to the sea* (1866).

Figure 7.17



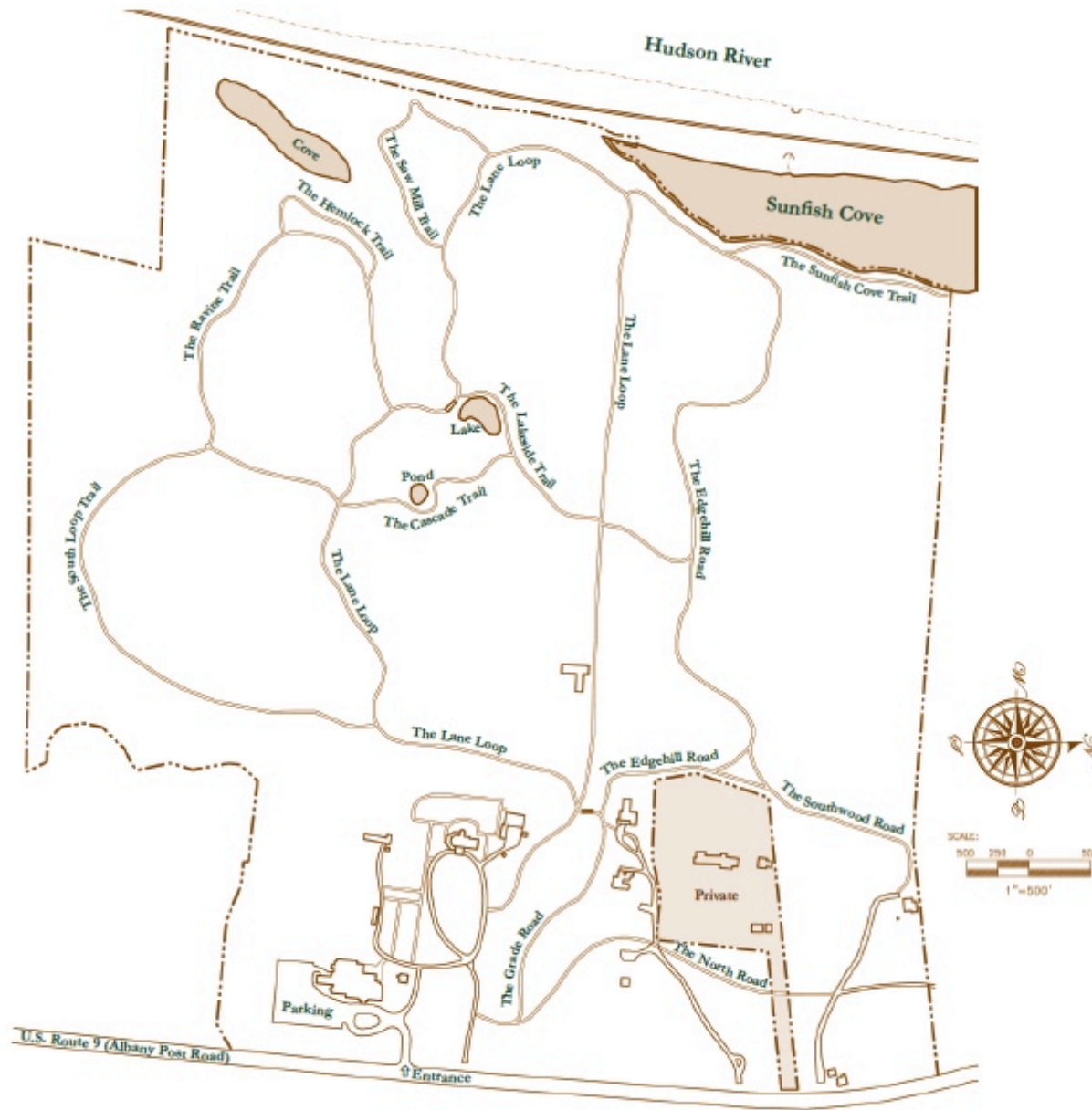
Aerial view of existing and proposed circulation at Locust Grove. Google Maps and Peter Watson.

Figure 7.18



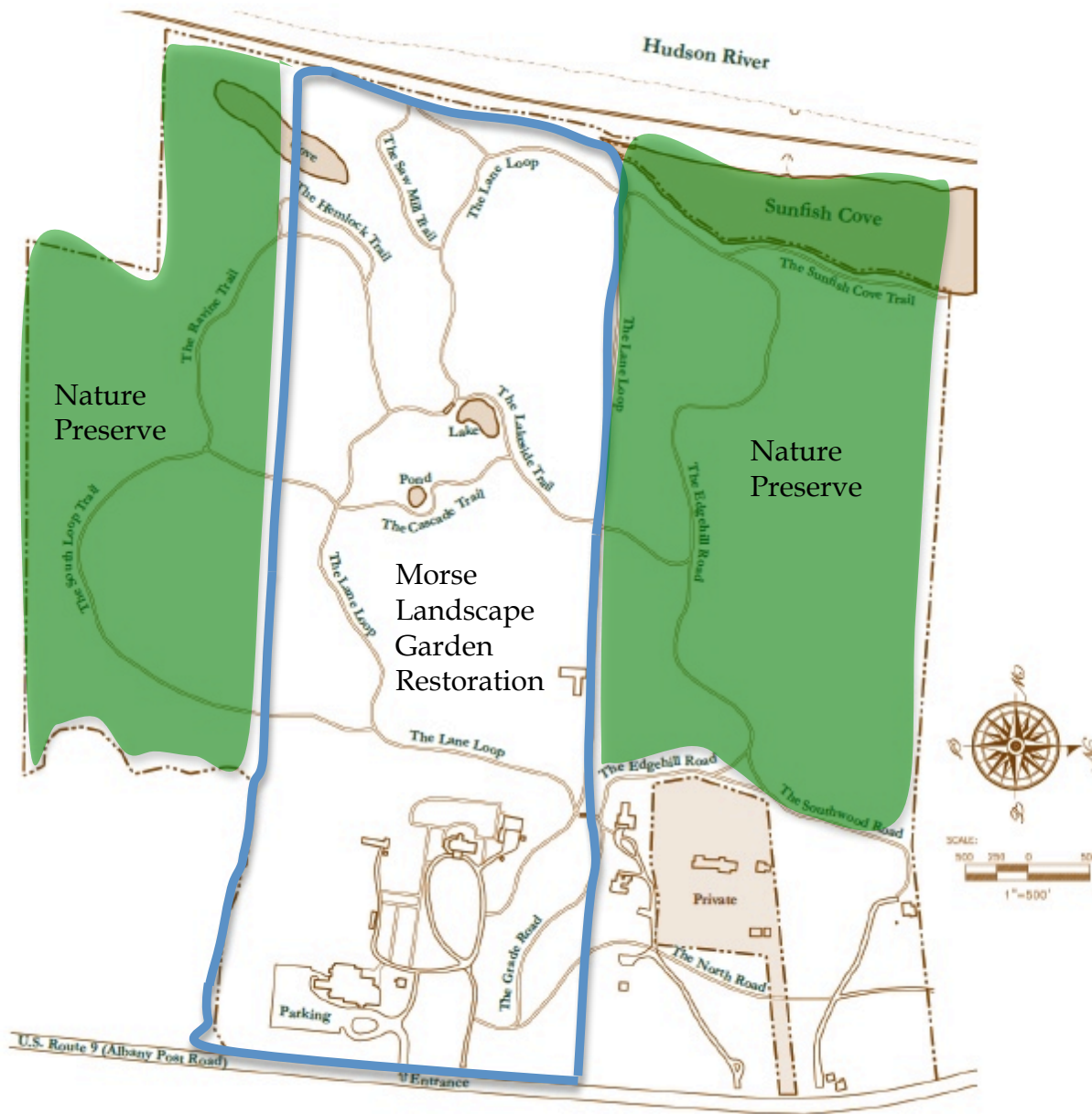
Locust Grove from the Southwest, circa 1870. Locust Grove Estate.

Figure 7.19



Locust Grove Trail Map. 2012. Locust Grove Estate

Figure 7.20



Locust Grove Trail Map. 2012. Locust Grove Estate, Overlay: Peter Watson.

## Picturesque Transformation Checklist

Even though their basic Hudson riverfront settings were similar, the four picturesque transformation projects covered in this study cover a wide range of architectural styles, landscape features, and client circumstances. Nevertheless, there is a strong “family resemblance,” and Davis re-used many features across the projects. The table below provides a summary of the primary features of the picturesque transformation projects that can be used as a checklist for other surviving Davis projects:

		<i>Blithewood</i>	<i>Bronson</i>	<i>Montgomery Place</i>	<i>Locust Grove</i>
Approach	Park Lodge	X (1836,1841)		X (unexec)	
	Stable	X	X	X	
Transformation Strategy	Overlay	X (1836)	X (1839)	X	
	Addition	X (1842)	X (1849)		X
	Wrap				X
Architectural Style	Bracketed	X (1836)	X (1839)		
	Italianate	X (1842)	X (1849)		X
	Classical			X	
Elements	Tower	X (Round)	X (Square)		X (Square)
	Verandah	X	X	X	X
	Porte-Cochère				X
	Octagonal Bays	X	X	X	X
Detailing	Balustrade		X (Roof)	X (Roof/1 <sup>st</sup> Flr)	
	Pagoda Roof		X		
	Roof Crowns	X	X	X	X (unexec)
	Venetian Blinds	X	X	X	X
	Trelliswork	X	X		X
	Corner Urns	X		X	X
	Chimney Pots	X	X		



	<i>Blithewood</i>	<i>Bronson</i>	<i>Montgomery Place</i>	<i>Locust Grove</i>
Landscape Features <sup>1</sup>				
Terracing	X	X	X	X
Rustic Bridge	X	X	X	
Rustic Seats	X	?	X	
Greenhouse	X (Grapery)			
Springhouse	X			
Water Feature	X (Lake)			X (Pond)
Foot Paths	X	X	X	X

---

<sup>1</sup> This table includes only landscape features associated with the Davis period of involvement.

## Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-92) Timeline

- 1803 Alexander Jackson Davis born in New York, NY.
- 1805 Davis family moves to Newark, NJ.
- 1813 Davis family moves to Utica, NY.
- 1817 Davis family moves to Auburn, NY.
- 1818 A.J. Davis apprenticed as a typesetter in Alexandria, VA to his half brother Samuel.
- 1823 Davis returns to New York City. Supports himself as typesetter and producing technical drawings.
- Winter 1825 Receives first commissions for architectural renderings from bookseller/publisher A.T. Goodrich.
- Nov 1825 Davis becomes active in New York Drawing Association organized by Samuel F.B. Morse.
- Jan 1826 National Academy of Design instituted. Davis enrolled as student in Antique School.
- 1826 Davis prepares architectural renderings and plans for architect Josiah H. Brady.
- Mar 1826 Morse delivers "Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts."
- 1827 A.J. Davis listed in Longworth's city directory as "Architectural Composer" with address at 4 Wall St.
- 1827 Anthony Imbert publishes *Views of the Public Buildings in the City of New-York* featuring twelve of Davis's views and cements Davis's reputation as a draftsman.
- Apr 1827 Davis submits four drawings (including one original architectural design) to National Academy of Design annual art exhibition including one original design.
- Feb 1828 Davis records that he "Met Mr. Town, Architect" in his Day Book.
- Mar 1828 Davis's first reading of Stuart & Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* borrowed from Ithiel Town.

- Apr 1828 Davis submits ten drawings (including three original architectural designs) to National Academy of Design annual art exhibition.
- Jan 1829 Davis receives first architectural commission for a Classical style county house for James Hillhouse in New Haven, CT.
- Feb 1829 Davis joins Ithiel Town in architectural partnership. (Town and Davis, Architects Feb 1829-May 1835), (Town, Davis and Dakin, Architects May 1832-Nov 1834)
- Apr 1829 Davis submits eight drawings (including four original architectural designs) to National Academy of Design annual art exhibition.
- Oct 1829 Town leaves for extended European tour. Painters Samuel Morse and Nathan Jocelyn accompany him to Italy.
- Jul 1830 Town returns from Europe.
- Sept 1830 Davis records "Study of Repton, Whately, Marshall on Landscape Gardening" in his Daybook.
- 1831 Davis wins competition for Indiana State Capital building
- Mar 1831 Davis receives first commission from Robert Donaldson to design iron railing and ornaments for Donaldson's State Street town house.
- Oct 1832 Davis elected as an artist member of the American Academy of Fine Arts. Submits four entries (one original design) into annual exhibition.
- Oct 1832 Designs for Gothic style villa Glen Ellen for Robert Gilmor, Jr., near Baltimore.
- 1833 Town and Davis win competition for United States Custom House in New York. Final design altered during construction by Samuel Thompson.
- Jan 1834 Davis begins collaboration with Robert Donaldson on villa in English Collegiate style at Fishkill Landing (unexecuted).
- 1834 Unexecuted designs for United State Patent Office.
- 1834 Davis designs Pauper Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island.
- Jul 1834 Sketching trip to Catskills with engraver/painters Asher B. Durand and John William Casilear. Visits Thomas Cole at home.

- 1834 Davis elected to board of American Academy.
- 1835 New Gothic-style building for University of the City of New York (designed by Town, Davis and Dakin) opens. Samuel F. B. Morse takes rooms in northwest tower.
- 1835 Thomas Cole's nephew William Henry Bayless begins apprenticeship with Town and Davis (Cole and Bayless receive third prize for Ohio State House commission in 1838).
- 1836 Davis and Town participate in unsuccessful negotiations to merge American Academy and National Academy of Design.
- 1836 Morse paints landscape used as frontispiece for Davis's *Rural Residences*.
- 1836 Ravenswood development project on Long Island (unexecuted) for Charles H. Roach.
- Jun 1836 First visit to Blithewood (1836-1850). Davis begins redesign of house into cottage ornée and new design for rustic cottage style gatehouse.**
- Aug 1838 Sketching trip with Durand and Cole. Visits Saratoga Springs and Niagara Falls.
- May 1837 Panic of 1837 creates widespread bank failures and economic depression.
- Jul 1837 First visit by A.J. Davis to Washington Irving's "Sunnyside."
- 1838 *Rural Residences* published.
- Jul 1838 Davis begins work on "Knoll" (1838-42) for William M. Paulding.
- Dec 1838 Downing first writes to Davis on referral of Robert Donaldson.
- Feb 1839 Davis draws Sheldon's, Irving's, and Perry's villas on wood for Downing's book.
- 1839 Thomas Cole paints "The Architect's Dream" for Ithiel Town.
- Apr 1839 Davis's first visit to Dr. Bronson's House. Davis redesigns east elevation and designs new stable complex.**
- 1841 Downing's *A Treatise on the Theory & Practice of Landscape Gardening, adapted to North America* published.
- Oct 1841 Davis meets Cora Barton Livingston on Cruger's Island and begins designs for additions to Montgomery Place.**

- Oct 1841**      **Davis designs second (hexagonal) gatehouse at Blithewood.**
- Jan 1842      Davis corresponds with Downing on designs for *Cottage Residences*.
- May 1842      Davis resumes partnership with Ithiel Town and moves to 93 Merchant's Exchange.
- 1842          Town & Davis orchestrate sale of American Academy painting collection to Daniel Wadsworth and design Wadsworth Athenaeum.
- Sept 1842**      **Italianate tower addition to Blithewood under construction.**
- Jun 1844      Death of Ithiel Town.
- Jul 1844**      **Additions to Montgomery Place completed.**
- 1845**          **Blithewood picture gallery completed.**
- 1847          Davis designs one of the earliest Italianate town houses in New York for James W. Phillips and Charles C. Taber.
- Feb 1848      Death of Thomas Cole.
- Sept 1849**      **Designs new Italianate tower addition for Dr. Bronson.**
- 1850          Downing's *Architecture of Country Houses* published.
- Jul 1850      Downing travels to England and recruits Calvert Vaux to form Downing & Vaux, Architects.
- Apr 1851**      **A.J. Davis begins redesign of Locust Grove with Morse.**
- Jul 1852      Death of A.J. Downing in steamboat *Henry Clay* accident.
- Dec 1852**      **Donaldson sells Blithewood and moves to "Edgewater."**
- 1853          A.J. Davis marries Margaret Beale.
- 1853          A.J. Davis begins development of Llewellyn Park with Llewellyn Solomon Haskell.
- 1854          Flora Foster Davis born.
- 1854**          **Dr. Oliver Bronson sells estate in Hudson.**
- 1855          Begins designs for castellated villa Ericstan (1855-59) for John Herrick.
- 1856          Joseph Beale Davis born.

- 1857 Olmsted & Vaux win commission for Central Park.
- 1858 Davis designs the Gothic-style House of Mansions, a predecessor of the modern apartment-house, on Fifth Avenue.
- 1863 Davis design's portico modeled on the Temple of Vesta for Montgomery Place.**
- Nov 1864 A.J. Davis begins transformation of Knoll into Lyndhurst for George Merritt.
- 1867 A.J. Davis enters competition for New York City Post Office (awarded to A.B. Mullett).
- Apr 1872 Samuel F. B. Morse dies.**
- 1873 Cora Barton Livingston dies ending work at Montgomery Place.**
- 1878 Davis closes his architectural office in New York and semi-retires to Wildmont, his home in Llewellyn Park, NJ.
- 1892 Davis dies at Wildmont at the age of 90.

## Bibliography:

- Ackerman, James S. *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Anderson, Jean Bradley. *Carolinean on the Hudson: The Life of Robert Donaldson*. Raleigh, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- Balmori, Diana. "Architecture, Landscape, and the Intermediate Structure: Eighteenth Century Experiments in Mediation" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* Vol. 50, No. 1(Mar. 1991).
- Beach, Moses Yale. *Wealth and Biography of the Citizens of New York City*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: The Sun Office, 1845.
- Beard, James F., Jr. "Cooper and his Artistic Contemporaries" in *New York History*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (October 1954), 480-495.
- Bradbury, Anna R. *History of the City of Hudson, New York with Biographical Sketches of Henry Hudson and Robert Fulton*. Hudson, New York: Record Printing and Publishing Co.,1908.
- Brendel-Pandich, Suzanne. "From Cottages to Castles: The Country Homes of Alexander Jackson Davis" in *Alexander Jackson Davis: American Architect: 1803-1892* (New York: Rizzoli Intl, 1992).
- Brownell, Charles E. "The Italianate Villa and the Search for an American Style, 1840 – 1860" in *The Italian Presence in American Art, 1760-1820*. Irma Jaffray ed., New York: Fordham University Press, 1992.
- Burke, Edmund. *An Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful; With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste*. Reprint. New York: Harper Brothers, 1844.
- Carso, Kerry Dean. "The Old Dwelling Transmogrified: James Fenimore Cooper's Otsego Hall" in *James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art, Papers from the 2001 Cooper Seminar* (No. 13), Oneonta, NY: The State University of New York College at Oneonta, 2001.
- Carter, George, Patrick Goode, and Kedrun Laurie ed. *Humphry Repton Landscape Gardener 1752-1818*. London: Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 1982.
- Catalog of the Architectural and Literary Library of Alexander Jackson Davis*. New York: Bangs & Co., 1901.

- Conron, Joseph. *American Picturesque*. State College, PA: State University of Pennsylvania, 2002.
- Davis, Alexander Jackson. *Rural Residences, Etc. Consisting of Designs, Original and Selected, for Cottages, Farm-houses, Villas, and Village Churches*. New York: by the author, 1838.
- Davies, Jane B. "Davis and Downing: Collaborators in the Picturesque," *Prophet with Honor: The Career of Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-52* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989), 81-123.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A. J. Davis and American Classicism: an exhibition presented by Historic Hudson Valley*. Tarrytown, NY: Sleepy Hollow Press, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A. J. Davis' Projects for a Patent Office Building, 1832-1834," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Oct., 1965), pp. 229-251.
- Dearn, T.D.W. *Sketches in Architecture; Consisting of Original Designs for Cottages and Rural Dwellings, Suitable to Persons of Moderate Fortune, and for Convenient Retirement with Plans and Appropriate Scenery to Each*. London: J. Taylor, 1807.
- Donnell, Edna. "A. J. Davis and the Gothic Revival." *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Sep., 1936), 183-233.
- Donoghue, John. *Alexander Jackson Davis, Romantic Architect, 1803-1892*. New York: Arno Press, 1982.
- Downing, A. J. *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America ; With a View to the Improvement of Country Residences*. New York and London: Wiley & Putnam, 1841.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Cottage Residences; or a Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottages-Villas, and their Gardens and Grounds. Adapted to North America.*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., New York and London: Wiley & Putnam, 1842.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America ; With a View to the Improvement of Country Residences*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York and London: Wiley & Putnam, 1844.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Cottage Residences; or a Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottages-Villas, and their Gardens and Grounds. Adapted to North America.*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, New York and London: Wiley & Putnam, 1847.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A Visit to Montgomery Place" in *The Horticulturalist*, Vol 2. No. 4 (Oct 1847).



- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Architecture of Country Houses; Including Designs for Cottages, Farm Houses, and Villas, with Remarks on Interiors, Furniture, and the Best Modes of Warming and Ventilating*. 1st ed. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1850.
- Dunlap, William. *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*. New York: George P. Scott, 1834.
- Elsam, Richard, *An Essay on Rural Architecture*, London: The Philanthropic Society, 1803.
- “Farm and Villa of Mr. Donaldson” in *The American Agriculturalist and Rural New Yorker*, Vol. 5, No. 5, 1846.
- Gilpin, William. *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; On Sketching Landscape: to which is added a Poem on Landscape Painting*. London: R. Blamire, 1792.
- Gloag, John. *Mr Loudon’s England: the life and work of John Claudius Loudon, and his Influence on Architecture and Furniture Design*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Oriel Press, 1970.
- Haley, Jacquetta M. *Pleasure Grounds: Andrew Jackson Downing and Montgomery Place with Illustrations by Andrew Jackson Davis*. Tarrytown, NY: Sleepy Hollow Press, 1988.
- Hamlin, Talbot F. *The Greek Revival in America: Being an Account of the Important Trends in American Architecture and American Life prior to the War between the States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944.
- Hunt, John Dixon. *The Genius of Place, The English Landscape Garden, 1620-1820*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.
- Hunt, Louise Livingston. *Memoir of Mrs. Edward Livingston with Letters hereto Unpublished*. New York: Harper Brothers, 1886.
- Hussey, Christopher. *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View*. London: Putnam, 1927.
- Knight, Richard Payne. *The Landscape, A Didactic Poem*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: J. Bulmer, 1796.
- Krattinger, William E. *Dr. Oliver Bronson House and Estate National Historic Landmark Nomination Form*. New York: New York State Office of Recreation and Preservation, 1997.

- Liscombe, R.W. "A New Era in My Life": Ithiel Town Abroad." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Mar., 1991).
- Lossing, Benson J. *The Hudson, from the Wilderness to the Sea*. Troy, New York: H.B. Nims & Co., 1866.
- Loudon, John Claudius. *A Treatise on Forming, Improving, and Managing Country Residences; and on the Choices of Situation Appropriate to Every Purchaser*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Observations on Laying out Farms in the Scotch Style, Adapted to England*. London: John Harding, 1812.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *An Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture, and Furniture*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1839.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion*, London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1838.
- Lugar, Robert, *Architectural Sketches for Cottages, Rural Dwellings and Villas in the Grecian, Gothic and Fancy styles*, London: J. Taylor, 1805.
- MacDougall, Elizabeth. ed. *John Claudius Loudon and the Early Nineteenth Century in Great Britain*. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1980
- Major, Judith K. *To Live in the New World: A. J. Downing and American Landscape Gardening*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.
- Maynard, W. Barksdale, *Architecture in the United States: 1800-1850*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Malton, James, *An Essay on British Cottage Architecture*, London: Hookham & Carpenter, 1798.
- Marshall, William. *Planting and Ornamental Gardening: a Practical Treatise*. London: J. Dodsley, 1785.
- Mesick, Cohen, Wilson, Baker Architects. *Dr. Oliver Bronson House Conservation & Stabilization Report*. Albany: Mesick, Cohen, Wilson, Baker Architects, 2011.
- Middleton, Charles. *Designs for Gates and Rails Suitable to Parks, Pleasure Grounds*. London: J. Taylor, 1818.
- Montgomery Place National Historic Landmark Nomination Report. New York: New York State Office of Parks & Recreation, 1990.
- Morrison, Grant. *Isaac Bronson and the Search for System in American Capitalism, 1789-1838*. New York: Arno Press, 1978.

- Morse, Edward Lind. *Samuel F.B. Morse, his Letters and Journals*, vol 1-2. New York: E.L. Morse, 1914.
- Morse, Samuel F. B. *Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts*. Civosky, Nicholas ed. St. Louis: University of Missouri Press, 1983.
- Papworth, John Buonarotti. *Hints on Ornamental Gardening: Consisting of a Series of Designs for Garden Buildings, Useful and Decorative Gates, Fences, and Railings*, London, R. Ackerman, 1823.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Rural Residences, Consisting of a Series of Designs for Cottages, Decorated Cottages, Small Villas and Other Ornamental Buildings*, London: R. Ackerman, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., 1832.
- Parmentier, A. "Landscapes and picturesque gardens" *The New American Gardener*. 13<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Otis, Broaders, & Co., 1839.
- Peck, Amelia. ed. *Alexander Jackson Davis, American Architect*. New York: Rizzoli International Publishers, 1992.
- The Picture of New York, and Strangers's Guide to the Commercial Metropolis of the United States*. New York: A.T. Goodrich, 1828.
- Pierson, William H., Jr. *American Buildings and their Architects, Technology & The Picturesque, The Corporate and the Early Gothic Styles*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1980.
- Piwonka, Ruth, and Roderic Blackburn. *A Visible Heritage, Columbia County, New York: A History in Art and Architecture*. Hensonville, New York: Black Dome Press, 1996.
- Plaw, John. *Rural Architecture or Designs, From the Simple Cottage to the Decorated Villa*. London: I. & J. Taylor, 1785.
- Price, Sir Uvedale. *An Essay on the Picturesque as Compared with the Sublime and Beautiful; and on the Use of Studying Pictures for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: J. Robson, 1796.
- Rebora, Carrie. "Alexander Jackson Davis and the Arts of Design" in *Alexander Jackson Davis, American Architect*. New York: Rizzoli International Publishers, 1992, 23-49.
- Repton, Humphry. *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening: Collected from Designs and Observations Now in the Possession of Noblemen and Gentlemen, for Whose Use*

*they were Originally Made: the Whole Tending to Establish Fixed Principles in the Laying Out of the Ground.* London: W Bulmer & Co., 1794.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening: Including some Remarks on Grecian and Gothic Architecture, Collected from Various Manuscripts, in the Possession of the Different Noblemen and Gentlemen, for Whose Use they were Originally Written; the Whole Tending to Establish Fixed Principles in the Respective Arts.* London: J. Taylor, at the Architectural Library, 1803.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening: Including some Remarks on Grecian and Gothic Architecture, Collected from various manuscripts, in in the Possession of the Different Noblemen and Gentlemen, for Whose Use they were Originally Written; the Whole Tending to Establish Fixed Principles in the Respective Arts.* London: J. Taylor, at the Architectural Library, 1816.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the Late Humphrey Repton, Esq. being his entire works on these subjects.* J.C. Loudon ed., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Longman & Co., 1840.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Humphry Repton: the Red Books for Brandsbury and Glemham Hall.* Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1994.

Reynolds, Helen Wilkinson. *Dutchess County Doorways and Other Examples of Period-Work in Wood, 1730 to 1830.* New York: William Farquhar Payson. 1931.

Robinson, Peter Frederick. *Rural Architecture, Being a Series of Designs for Ornamental Cottages.* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: James Carpenter and Son., 1828.

Schuyler, David. *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing 1815-52.* Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1996.

Silverman, Kenneth. *Lightning Man: The Accursed Life of Samuel Morse.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Simo, Melanie Louise Simo. *Loudon and the Landscape: From Country Seat to Metropolis, 1783-1843.* New Haven: Yale University Press. 1988.

Skeen, C. Edward. *John Armstrong, Jr., 1758-1843: a Biography.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982.

Snadon, Patrick, A.J. *Davis and the Gothic Revival Castle in America 1832-1865,* Ph. D. diss. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Stilgoe, John R. *Borderland: Origin of the American Suburb, 1820-1939.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

- Sweeting, Adam. *Reading Houses and Building Books: Andrew Jackson Downing and the Architecture of Popular Antebellum Literature, 1835-1855*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1996.
- Tatum, George B. *Andrew Jackson Downing: Arbiter of American Taste, 1815-52*. Ph. D. diss., New York: Da Capo Press, 1949.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Prophet with Honor: The Career of Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-52*. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1980.
- Toole, Robert M. *Plumb-Bronson House Preliminary Landscape Study*. Saratoga Springs, New York: R.M. Toole & Associates, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'The Prophetic Eye of Taste:' Samuel F.B. Morse at Locust Grove" in *America's First River: History and Culture of the Hudson River Valley*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Landscape Gardens on the Hudson, a History: the Romantic Age, the Great Estates, and the Birth of American Landscape Architecture*. Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press Corp, 2010.
- Truettner, William H. and Alan Wallach, ed. *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1994.
- Walpole, Horace. *An Essay on Modern Gardening*. Reprint. Canton, PA: Kirgate Press, 1904.
- Whately, Thomas. *Observations on Modern Gardening, and Laying out Pleasure Grounds, Parks, Farms, Ridings, etc. Illustrated by Descriptions. To Which is Added, and Essay on the Different Natural Situations of Gardens*. 2nd ed. London: T. Payne, 1775.
- Wightwick, George and A.J. Downing. *Hints to Young Architects. Together With a Model Specification*. New York and London: Wiley & Putnam, 1847.
- Willis, Nathaniel P. *American Scenery; or Land, Lake, and River. Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature*. London: George Virtue, 1840.
- Wilton, Andrew and Tim Barringer. *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Zukowsky, John, "Castles on the Hudson", in *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (Spring, 1979).