

New Introduction

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During the 1850s and 1860s, by the far the most prominent man in all of Cornwall-on-Hudson—indeed in all of Orange County if not New York State—was the writer, editor, and publisher Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806–1867). And nearly as prominent as the man was his Hudson Valley estate, Idlewild, where literary elites gathered and about which Willis himself wrote and published extensively.

Although largely forgotten today, Willis was a true lion of his era. The writers he worked with included in their ranks Washington Irving, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He was, as well, a close personal friend of Charles Dickens, with whom he famously dined on champagne and oysters. He founded the magazine *Home Journal* in 1846, the name of this publication eventually evolving into *Town and Country*, still published monthly.

Willis's entire clan was highly accomplished. His grandfather, Nathaniel Willis, was the publisher of newspapers in Massachusetts and Virginia. His father, another Nathaniel Willis, founded the *Youth's Companion* magazine. Willis's sister Sara Payson Willis was a widely respected author who published under the pen name *Fanny Fern*. A brother, Richard Storrs Willis, was a noted composer of sacred music, his most lasting work being the melody for the Christmas Carol "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." The African American writer (and runaway slave) Harriett Jacobs lived in the Willis household (Idlewild), while drafting her now-classic abolitionist memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published with Willis's help in 1861.*

* Jacobs came to the attention of Willis through his sister, Sara Payson Willis (aka Fanny Fern) who had befriended Jacobs after her escape to the North from a North Carolina plantation. In 1852, in response to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law that enabled slave-catchers to detain and return to the South escaped slaves who had made it to the North, Willis's wife Cornelia Grinnell Willis formally "purchased" Harriet from the family that had formerly enslaved her,

In *Out-Doors at Idlewild: or The Shaping of a Home on the Banks of the Hudson* (1855), Willis chronicled the creation of his estate at Cornwall-on-Hudson (near West Point), as well as life amid its countryside. The land afforded brilliant views of the river and the mountains to the east. Calvert Vaux (1824–1895), the famed architect of both landscapes and houses, designed the elaborate and ornate Gothic Revival home that Willis named *Idlewood* (whereas he called the estate *Idlewild*), and into which the Willis family moved in July of 1853.* Willis sited the home close by a deep two-hundred-foot gorge via which what came to be known as “Idlewild Creek” cascaded down toward the river. Here, as health issues began to invalid him and confine him to home, Willis wrote a series of papers for his *Home Journal* documenting life at the seventy-acre estate; these eventually collected in *Out-Doors at Idlewild*.

With such contemporaries as William Cullen Bryant and Benson Lossing, Willis extolled “picturesque America” as represented in the works of the artists of the Hudson River School. Willis wrote a two-volume work entitled *American Scenery*, illustrated by William Henry Bartlett, in which he discussed at length the various natural wonders of the country—never overlooking the sights along the Hudson. In conjunction with such enterprises, he also strenuously lobbied on more than one occasion for the revision of names applied to elements of the countryside whenever he thought those names inadequate. Thus “Murderer’s Creek” in Cornwall became “Moodna Creek” and “Butter Hill” (the massive granite mountain that forms the western edge of the great “Wind Gate” entrance to the Hudson Highlands between Cornwall and “Breakneck Ridge” on the eastern shore) became “Storm King Mountain.”

“In the varied scenery of our country,” he wrote, “there is many a natural beauty, destined to be the theme of our national poetry, which is desecrated by any vile name given it by vulgar chance.” Willis began dreaming up new names. . . . Willis’s efforts were far from silly or trite. They accurately reflected the value placed on the scenery by the Romantics of the nineteenth century. In bestowing Romantic names on the mountains which form the northern gate to the [Hudson] Highlands, Willis captured the emotional appeal of the Highland scenery and helped assure its preservation a century later.†

thus (somewhat) assuring her safety in the North. (Harriet, born 1813, had escaped to the North in 1842.) The Willis and Jacobs families remained close friends for several generations.

* In 1857 Vaux and his younger protégé Frederick Law Olmstead commenced collaborating on the design of what would become New York’s Central Park. Later, in 1872, Vaux collaborated with the Hudson River School painter Frederic Church in the design and landscaping of the latter’s home Olana, overlooking the Hudson River near the city of Hudson, New York. Vaux’s son, Downing Vaux (1856–1926) designed New York’s Riverside Drive.

† Frances F. Dunwell, *The Hudson River Highlands* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 92–93.

Willis's brick house Idlewood, which he called a "cottage," was actually quite more than that, with no less than fourteen rooms, an elaborate 13 foot by 23 foot entrance hall, high gables, and such detailed adornments as lancet windows, beautiful lattices, finials, and other accoutrements. In this design, Vaux was greatly influenced by the architect and landscape horticulturist Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–1852), a close friend of both Vaux and Willis and the author of *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850). Downing lived in nearby Newburgh.

The agenda here was not simply decorative, but societal and cultural. D'Amore notes that Willis "wrote extensively about domestic architecture, landscape, objects, and décor in [his] magazine, arguing that attention to details in these categories would transfer a spirit of well-being and happiness to one's person and property," and that good taste in these matters would enable people of all classes to "connect with the physical spaces they inhabited in ways that previously had been available only to the elite."*

As Downing wrote:

There are three excellent reasons why my countrymen should have good houses. The first is, because a good house (and by this I mean a fitting, tasteful, and significant dwelling) is a powerful means of civilization. A nation, whose rural population is content to live in mean huts and miserable hovels, is certain to be behind its neighbors in education, the arts, and all that makes up the external signs of progress. With the perception of proportion, symmetry, order, and beauty, awakens the desire for possession, and with them comes that refinement of manners which distinguishes a civilized from a coarse and brutal people. So long as men are forced to dwell in log huts and follow a hunter's life, we must not be surprised at lynch law and the use of the bowie knife. But, when smiling lawns and tasteful cottages begin to embellish a country, we know that order and culture are established. And, as the first incentive towards this change is awakened in the minds of most men by the perception of beauty and superiority in external objects, it must follow that the interest manifested in the Rural Architecture of a country like this, has much to do with the progress of its civilization.†

After Willis's death in 1867, his house and grounds went through a succession of owners followed by a period of abandonment and neglect—and eventually succumbed to the twentieth century.‡

* Maura D'Amore, "'Close Remoteness' Along the Hudson: Nathaniel Parker Willis's Suburban Aesthetic," *Early American Studies* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 365.

† Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: D. Appleton, 1850), v. Downing died in July of 1852 when the Hudson River steamer *Henry Clay* caught fire and sank near Yonkers, New York, taking eighty souls with it.

‡ Some published sources say one of Idlewild's subsequent owners was the Presbyterian minister, horticulturalist, and popular novelist Edward Payson Roe (1838–1888), but this is

The house Idlewood still stands today near the intersection of Curie Road and Idlewild Park Drive, but it has been so extensively remodeled as to be unrecognizable from the home Willis knew. During the early 1900s, the two-story (plus attic) structure was taken down to a single floor. At the same time, nearly all of Calvert Vaux's unique elements were removed. All that remains is the original plan of the ground floor, the original footprint of the house, and the original basement. The place is a private family residence. As well, the elaborate grounds are no more. They've been subdivided and made into yet another outpost of American suburbia—and a distinctly *un*picturesque outpost at that.

not the case. Roe's estate, Roelands, embraced what is today the Hudson Highlands Nature Museum's Wildlife Education Center in Cornwall, adjacent to which is the small Edward Payson Roe Memorial Park, with a plaque and a hiking trail.