



THOMAS COLE HOUSE

Kindred Spirits

Asher Brown Durand

Collection of the New York Public Library,  
Lenox and Tilden Foundation

THOMAS COLE HOUSE  
RECONNAISSANCE STUDY

JUNE 1980

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
NORTH ATLANTIC REGIONAL OFFICE

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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|       |  |    |
|-------|--|----|
| I.    | SUMMARY  | 4  |
| II.   | DESCRIPTION OF THE THOMAS COLE<br>HOUSE AND THE AREA | 7  |
|       | The Locale   |    |
|       | The House and Studio                                 |    |
|       | Structural Conditions                                |    |
|       | Ownership History                                    |    |
|       | Related Resources of the Mid-Hudson/Catskill Region  |    |
| III.  | THE PAINTER'S LIFE                                   | 18 |
|       | Early Years and Training                             |    |
|       | New York Art Circles and the Hudson River School     |    |
|       | Marriage and Life in Catskill                        |    |
| IV.   | CURRENT OWNERSHIP AND PUBLIC<br>DEMAND               | 25 |
| V.    | THREATS TO THE RESOURCE                              | 27 |
| VI.   | RESOURCE PROTECTION                                  | 29 |
|       | Existing   |    |
|       | Proposed   |    |
| VII.  | STATUS OF LAND VALUES                                | 31 |
| VIII. | OPTIONS FOR PRESERVATION OF THE<br>THOMAS COLE HOUSE | 32 |
| IX.   | APPENDICES   | 38 |
|       | STUDY TEAM   | 54 |

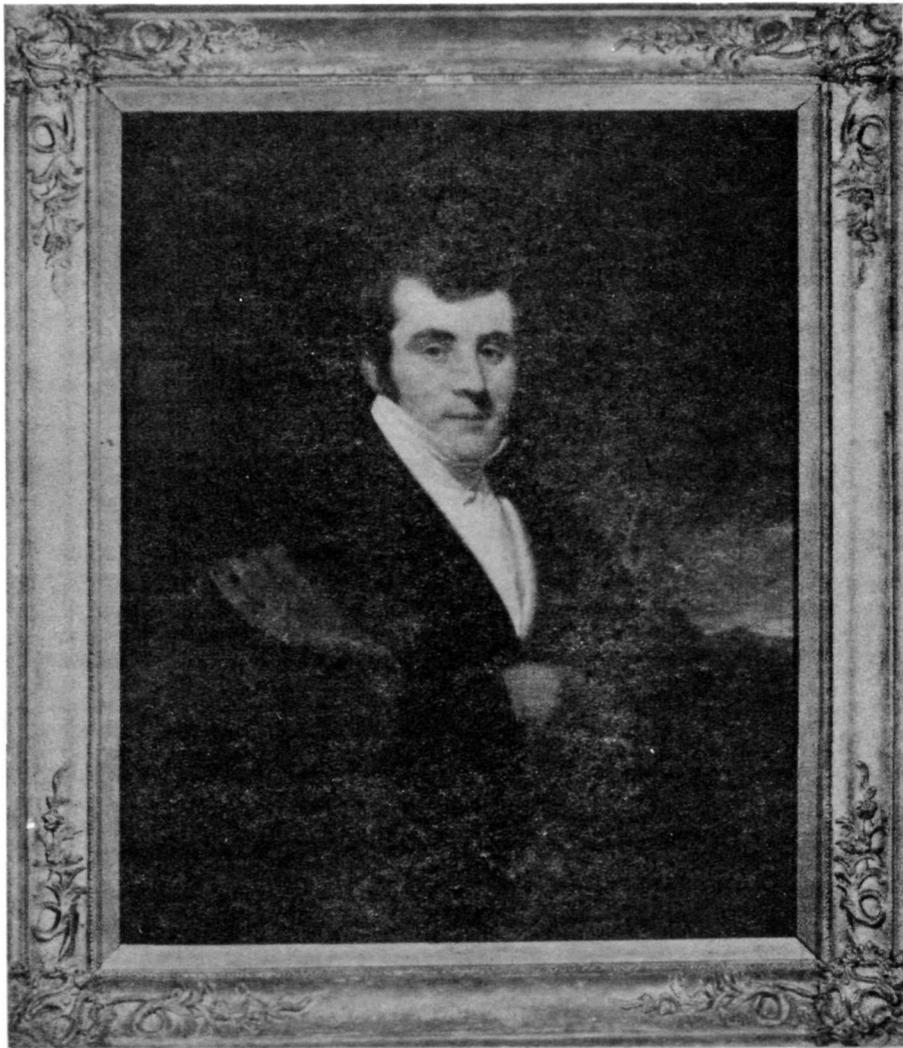
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## TABLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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|  |    |
|--|----|
| <u>Thomas Cole</u> , by Thomas Seir Cummings, Collection of the Albany Institute of History and Art (AIHA)   | 2  |
| Thomas Cole House at Catskill, N.Y., 1980, courtesy of the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development, Inc. (CCCD), photographer Charles D. Winters                              | 6  |
| Regional Map   | 9  |
| Mid-Hudson/Catskills Vicinity Map  | 10 |
| <u>Thomas Cole's First Studio at Catskill, 1836-1846</u> , by J.M. Falemar, 1947. 421, Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society   | 11 |
| Thomas Cole's New Studio at Catskill, AIHA   | 12 |
| Catskill Mountains from near Catskill, N.Y., CCCD  | 15 |
| Thomas Cole Daguerreotype, about age 40, Collection of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  | 19 |
| Interior of Cole's Studio, AIHA  | 21 |
| Interior of Cole's Living Room, AIHA   | 23 |
| Thomas Cole House Site Plan  | 24 |
| Grounds of the Thomas Cole House and Studio, 1980, CCCD  | 27 |
| Interior of the Old Studio, 1980, CCCD   | 30 |
| 1889 Burleigh Map of Catskill, N.Y.  | 33 |
| Rendering of <u>Thomas Cole Home and Studio</u> , 1848, taken from original sketch by Frederic Edwin Church, Courtesy of Olana State Historic Site, NYS Office of Parks and Recreation | 34 |
| Outhouse at the Thomas Cole House, 1980, CCCD  | 36 |

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". . . he had a fixed reputation, and was numbered among the men of whom our country had reason to be proud. I well remember what an enthusiasm was awakened by these early works of his . . . the delight which was expressed at the opportunity of contemplating pictures which carried the eye over scenes of wild grandeur peculiar to our country, over our aerial mountain tops with their mighty growth of forest never touched by the axe, along the banks of streams never deformed by culture, and into the depth of skies bright with the hues of our own climate; skies such as few but Cole could ever paint, and through the transparent abysses of which it seemed that you might send an arrow out of sight."

Excerpt from William Cullen Bryant's  
funeral oration on Thomas Cole in  
1848.

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# I. SUMMARY

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The Thomas Cole house and studio has national historic and cultural significance established in the following ways:

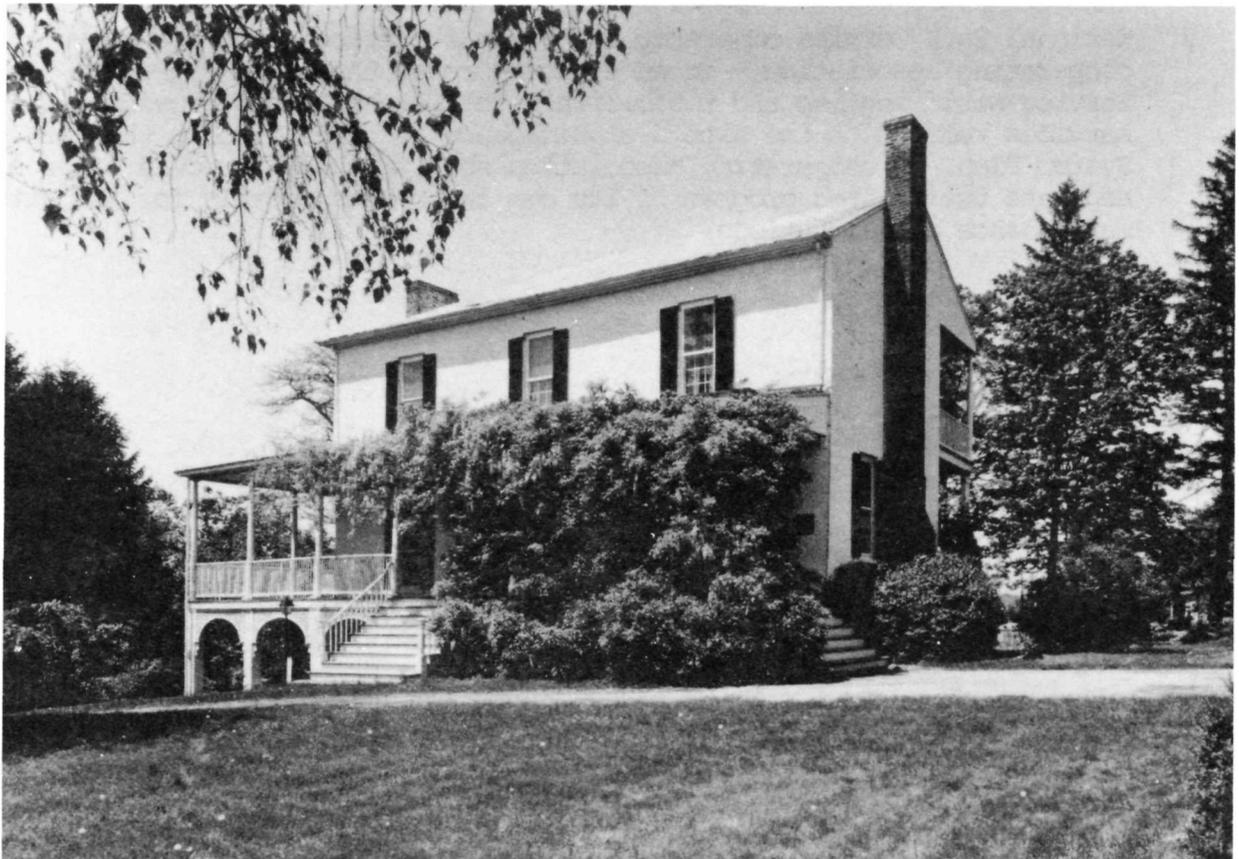
- designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1965
- identified in the National Park System Plan of 1972 as a site representing Romanticism in American Art, 1800-1840
- Thomas Cole is widely recognized as the founder of the Hudson River School, the first native American painting tradition. These paintings are characterized by the use of vivid colors to depict realistic but romanticized landscapes, their elements and atmosphere drawn from American scenery.
- Recent exhibitions of the Hudson River School and the 1979 sale of a Frederic Church painting for \$2.5 million have stimulated public interest in, and a critical reevaluation of, the contribution made by these painters to American culture.

The Cole house has recently passed from descendents of the artist to a private non-profit group who, as interim owners, seek a public use and ownership of the site which recognizes its national cultural and historical significance. This reconnaissance study is the first in-depth attempt by the National Park Service to identify opportunities to participate in the preservation of the Thomas Cole site.

The study favors a less than full scale creation of a National Historic Site for a number of reasons. There is revitalization activity in the Catskill area based on the historical associations of the Hudson River School. In an era when a geometric increase in the number of parks is coupled with a declining ability to fund them, it is important for the National Park Service to tap local commitment and talents. Local expression of interest in the site permits the exploration of various levels of National Park Service involvement as follows:

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1. No involvement - should the National Park Service decide that no involvement is necessary for the adequate protection of the site, the current owner will place the Cole property back on the market with preservation deed restrictions and seek a sympathetic new owner and use.
  2. Affiliated area status - affiliated area status allows the National Park Service to offer financial and technical assistance for rehabilitation to a cooperating association. This group would sustain a use related to the site's national significance.
  3. National Park Service ownership and visitor services/management by cooperating association - in an expanded role, the National Park Service would acquire and rehabilitate the Cole site and provide visitor services related to the site's significance as identified in the Park System Plan. A cooperating association sharing the site would offer a separate but related program of its own and be responsible for all site maintenance and operations.



## II. DESCRIPTION OF THE THOMAS COLE HOUSE AND THE AREA

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### The Locale

The residence and studio of Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River school of American landscape painting, are located at 218 Spring Street in Catskill, New York. The house is about one-half mile from the center of Catskill, a community of 5,800. The village is on the western bank of the Hudson River in upstate New York with easy access to the New York Thruway (I-87 and I-90). Albany, the nearest city is 32 miles north and New York City is 143 miles south. Eight Amtrak trains daily connect Hudson, New York, across the river from Catskill, to both Albany and New York City.

The Cole house is built on the back crest of the Hudson River's lateral highlands and has a sweeping view of the Catskill Mountains, some 10 miles distant. Although the estate originally was an 88 acre tract with river frontage, the river is not visible from the house. Today the 3.4 acre site is in a residential area with a mixture of Victorian and modern wood frame houses.

Nearby, the approach road to the Rip Van Winkle Bridge has given rise to recent commercial development, gas stations, and a synagogue at the new river crossroads, marring the rural residential quality of the neighborhood. Development will probably not continue, however, due to a high rate of commercial failure at this location and topographical constraints.

Catskill is a community that is working with its architectural and cultural heritage as a means of revitalization. For example, there is a program of storefront rehabilitation for the nineteenth century Main Street. The State Historic Preservation Office is also preparing a multiple resource nomination to the National Register based on the concentration of Hudson River school artists' activities in the Catskill area. Most recently, there has been talk of creating a New York State Urban Cultural Park in Catskill.

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## The House and Studio

The Cole house has brick walls that are painted white and a gabled roof. It is three-and-one-half stories high, including a full basement with access at grade level. Built circa 1815-1816, the estate was named Cedar Grove. There is a two-story veranda which wraps around two sides of the house at the basement and first floor levels. A broad stair leads up to the main entrance and veranda which has a delicate railing and trellis overgrown by trailing vines. Stylistically, the house is a combination of a traditional Hudson Valley federalist vernacular and influences introduced by its builder, Thomas T. Thomson, who had spent time in British Guiana.

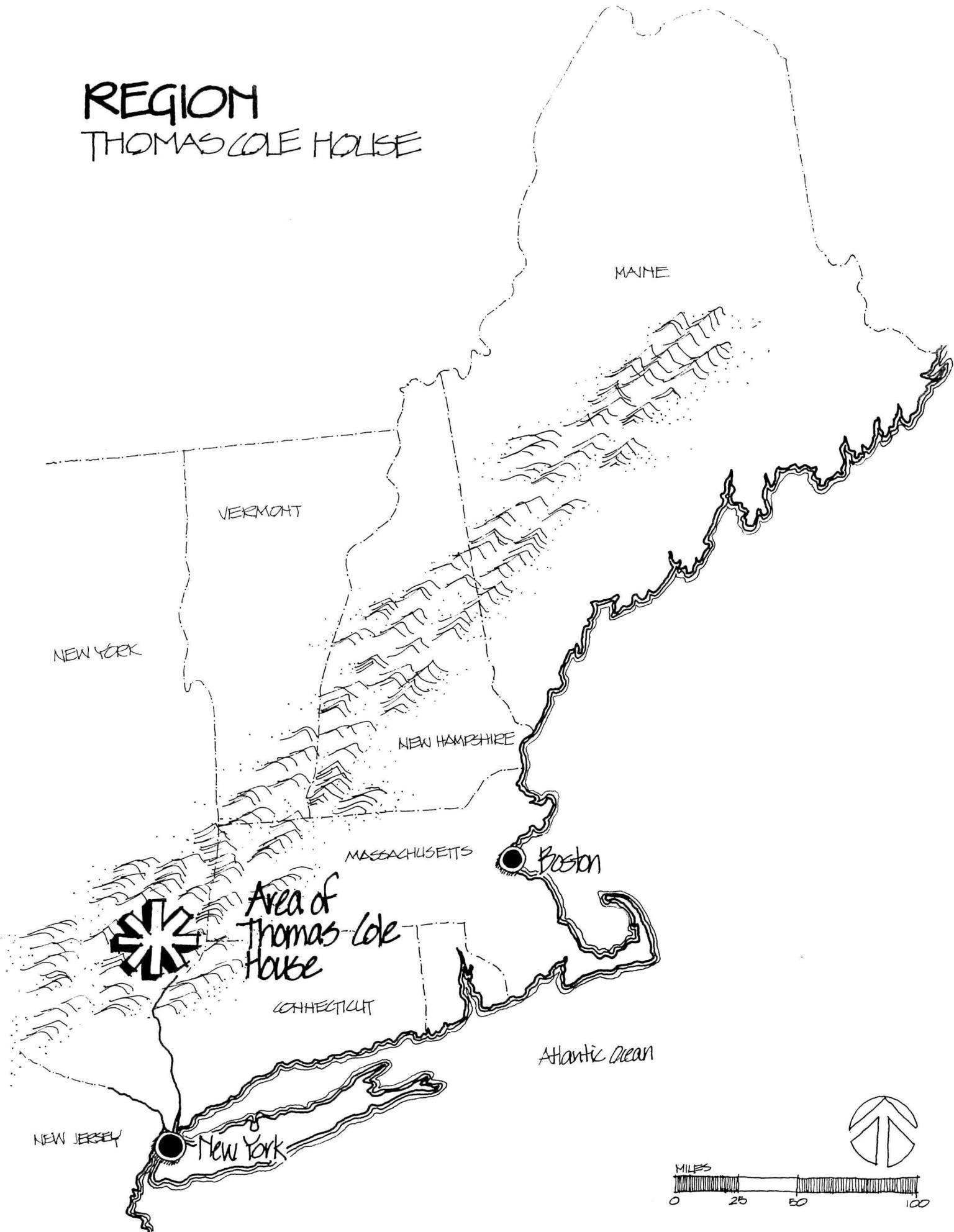
The Cole property was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965, commemorating Thomas Cole's residency from 1836 to 1848 - years marking his marriage and death and covering more than half of his mature professional life. The National Register nomination excluded the plot of land and new studio that Cole designed and built for himself in 1846. The land was subsequently sold and the new studio demolished.

The remainder of the 3.4 acre site includes the studio Cole used from 1836 to 1846. It is a saltbox-roofed, two-story wood frame building. There is a skylight in the northern roof slope, now covered, which may date from Cole's use. The interior of one half is unfinished and is not insulated while the other half has been adapted as a caretaker's quarters. It was probably originally a carriage house and shed storage. In front of the studio near the house is a wood frame three-hole outhouse. There is a small modern ramshackle garage built at the rear of the site.

One of Cole's sisters-in-law, a member of the Cedar Grove household, was an enthusiastic gardener and tended flower gardens and fruit trees planted on the grounds. Today the site still has quite a bit of vegetation ranging from mature deciduous trees and shrubbery to more formal plantings and fruit-bearing trees. The front yard has a pair of forty to fifty foot pines which obstruct the view of the Catskills from some vantage points in the yard. Starting at Spring Street, a graveled driveway winds up the rise on which the house sits and continues back through the property to

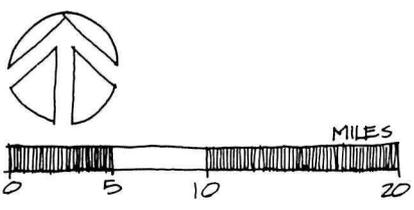
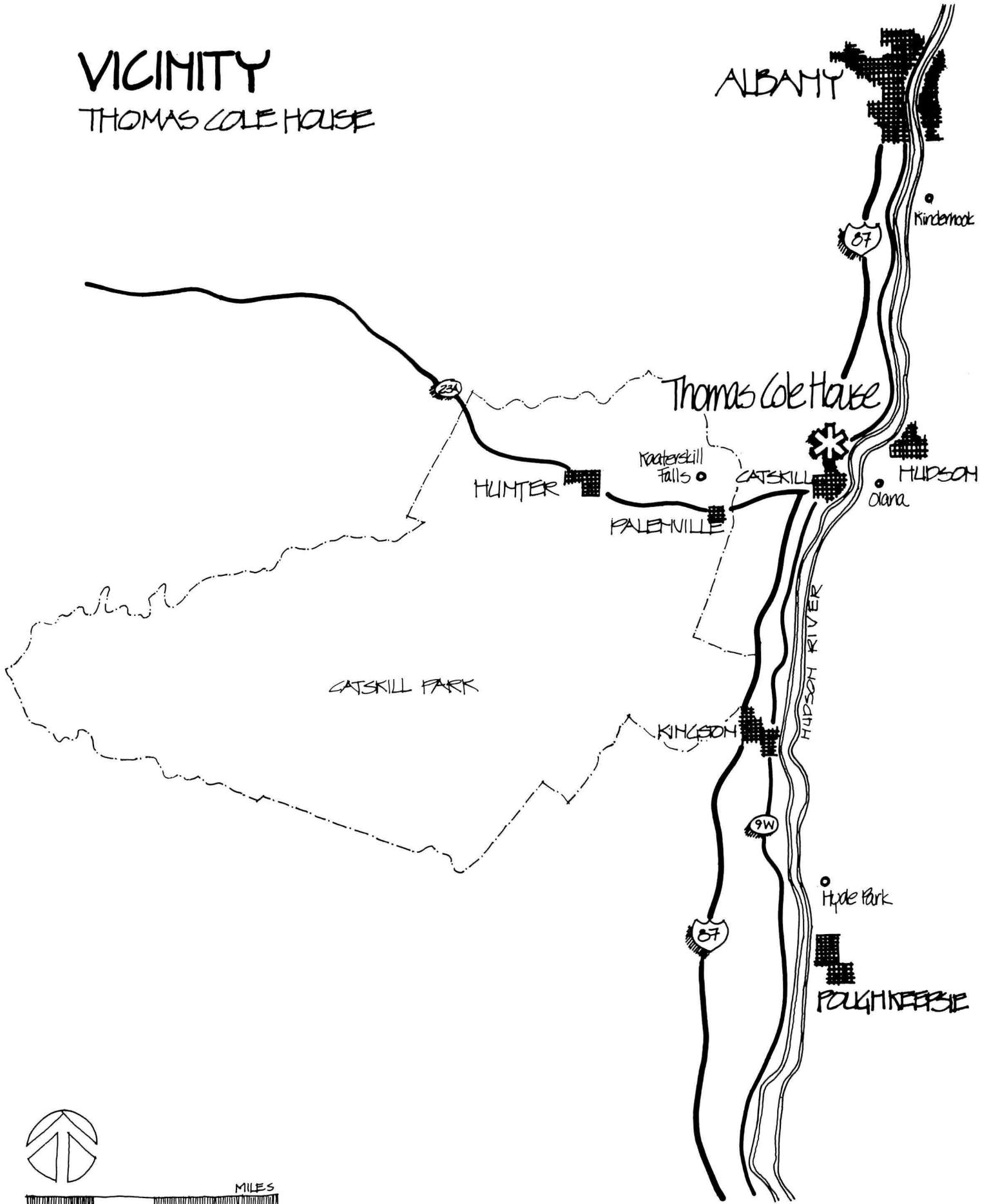
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# REGION THOMAS COLE HOUSE



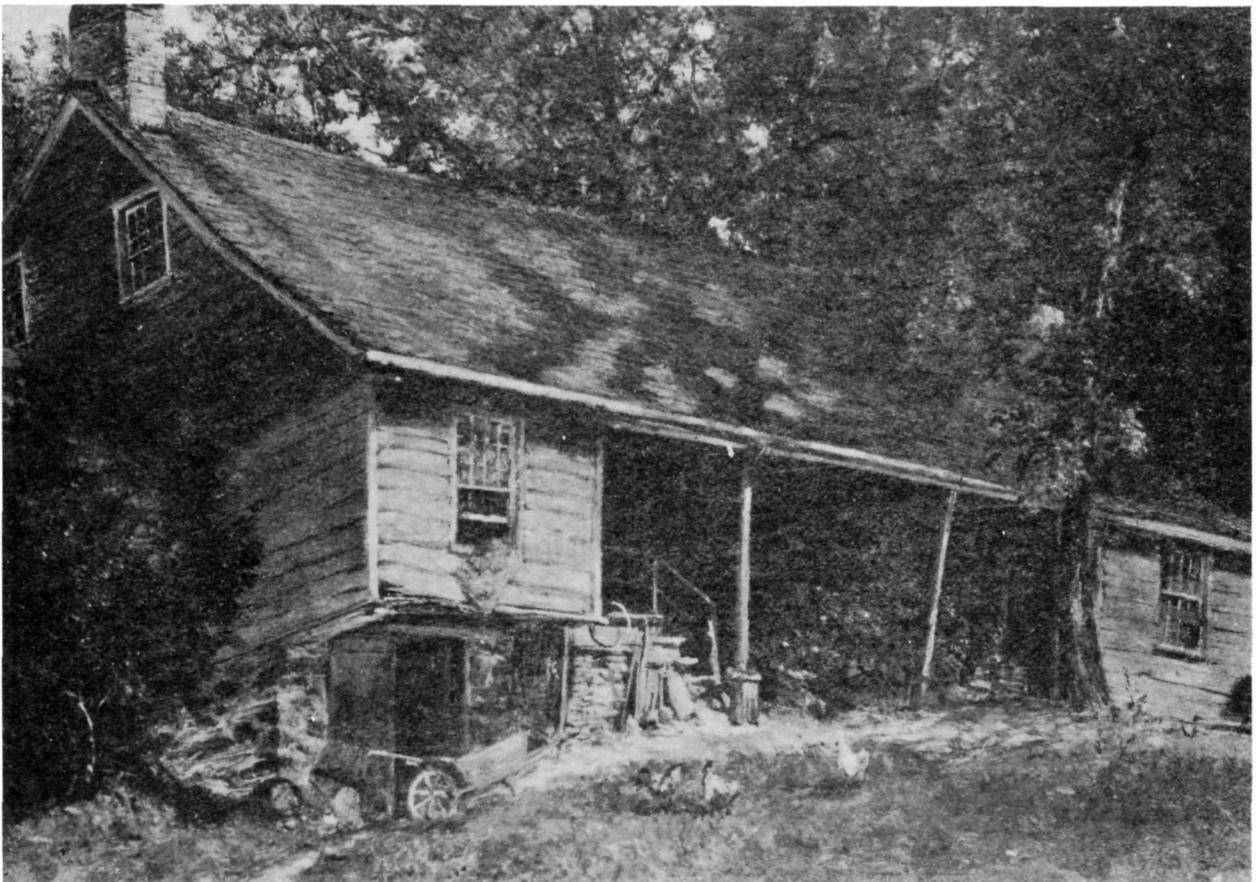
# VICINITY

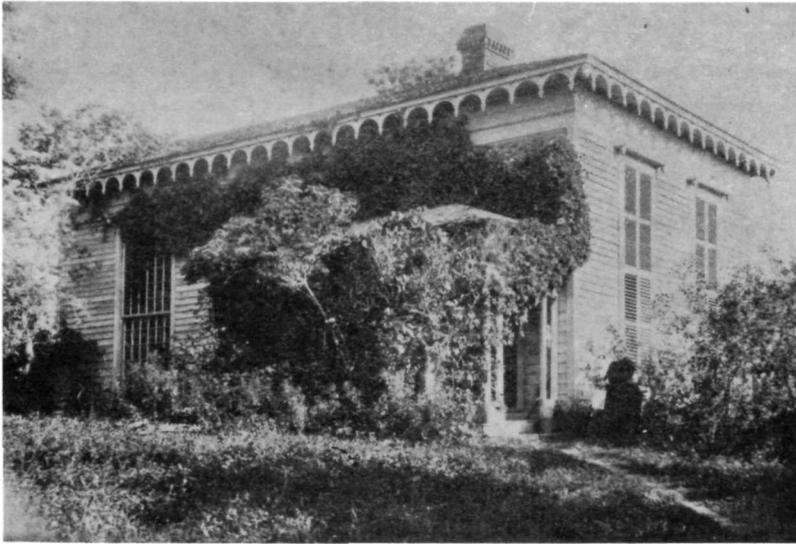
THOMAS COLE HOUSE



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exit on Pine Road, a private way ending at Hudson Street. The furnishings of the Cole house dating from his occupancy have been dispersed, and although records of its contents exist, finding the furniture and authenticating Cole's ownership would be impossible. The family owned numerous paintings and donated a few over time to local institutions like the Catskill Public Library. Finally, in the early 1960's, the contents of the house and twenty-two Cole paintings and drawings as well as two of his daughter's oils





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were sold at auction from the front steps of the house. The family only has a few Cole paintings today as heirlooms.

The prices commanded by Cole paintings at the auction were a fraction of their current value. There has been a growing public interest and a wave of museum research and critical reevaluation of the Hudson River school in recent years. Due to the previous lack of international attention, most of the Hudson River school's works are held in museums and private collections in the region. Large numbers of them are held by respected institutions like the Albany Institute of History and Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

The availability to the site of paintings and some of Cole's personal possessions is discussed further under RELATED RESOURCES OF THE MID-HUDSON/CATSKILL REGION.

### Structural Conditions

The Cole house is an extremely solid structure with thick masonry exterior and interior partition walls typical of Hudson Valley architecture of the period. The late-nineteenth century two-story, rear, wood frame addition also appears sturdy. The wood veranda and rear second story porch need stabilization work, having settled and weakened over time. The house was not heated for the balance of the past winter, causing the paint and plaster to deteriorate from the cold and damp. Some wooden structural members in the basement are weakened by rot. The studio building is in good condition and appears to have settled very unevenly so that even the roof seems to have buckled. However, a drawing done of the studio ca. 1850 shows the same unevenness.

A National Park Service historical architect, after a cursory examination of the house and studio, has made a very rough preliminary estimate of \$750,000 for completing the research, stabilization, and preservation work to Service standards.

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In the event of an art museum or gallery use, capital investments would need to be made in the house to prepare it for the display of art. The walls already provide wide expanses of space unobstructed by ornate architectural details. The installation of climate control, of a security and fire alarm system, of a method of screening direct sunlight, of access for the physically disabled, and of gallery lighting would be essential.

Parking at the site is extremely limited and residential development surrounding the site on three sides precludes any parking there. The adjoining synagogue, Temple Israel of Catskill, Inc., has a graveled lot that will hold about 100 cars. The synagogue has indicated that they would be amenable to a cooperative agreement with the Cole site provided it did not conflict with their regular Friday night services or the various holy days throughout the year.

## Ownership History

The Cole house, originally called Cedar Grove, was built between 1815 and 1816 by Thomas T. Thomson, a merchant and importer-exporter of goods from the British West Indies. Upon his death in 1821, the house and lands passed to two of his children, one of whom died soon thereafter. The inheriting son, John Alexander Thomson, was a bachelor who took in four nieces and their widowed mother, his sister.

In 1836, Thomas Cole met and married one of the four daughters, Maria Bartow, and moved into Cedar Grove. He lived there for the next twelve years until his death. Both he and his wife are buried in a Catskill cemetery only a few blocks from the house. J.A. Thomson died in 1846 and bequeathed the house to his four nieces, three of whom had never married. A portion of the land became the property of Thomas Cole in consideration for an unredeemed debt. It was on this land that Cole erected a studio of his own design.

Maria Bartow Cole and her sisters and four children continued to occupy the site after Cole's death. Times were difficult financially, and it is said that Frederic E. Church set up a trust in the 1850's to ease the hardship for the widow of his respected friend and teacher.

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For more than a century afterward, the house remained in the family, passing first to Cole's son Theodore, then to Florence Vincent Cole, and finally to Edith Cole Silberstein, the great-granddaughter of the artist.

The most significant alterations to the house have been the turn-of-the-century wood frame addition at the rear, and the chimney addition on the east exterior wall. Land sales of the substantial acreage of Cedar Grove trimmed the estate down to 3.4 acres from the original 88 acre tract, independent of more far-flung lands owned by the Thomson family. In the late 1960's, the demolition of the Italianate studio which Cole built in 1846 was a severe blow to the site's integrity. Today the land the studio stood on has been returned to the present acreage.

The property was purchased from Edith Cole Silberstein in December, 1979, by the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development, Inc. The family was no longer able to maintain ownership and sought a new owner who would guarantee the preservation of the site.

## Related Resources of the Mid-Hudson/Catskill Region

The area surrounding Catskill, New York, has many sites and scenic vistas associated with the Hudson River school artists. The most prominent are:

- 1) Catskill Mountain House site and North and South Lakes - This first luxury Catskills resort, now demolished, was near these twin lakes which were frequent subjects of paintings. This is protected land today, managed by the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (EnCon).
  - 2) Kaaterskill Falls and Kaaterskill Clove - This dramatic ravine and 200 foot waterfall are reached by Route 23-A, a scenic, two-lane road leading into the heart of the Catskills. This area was beloved by Cole and other artists who painted and sketched there. Today EnCon manages much of the Clove as wilderness and has trails leading to Kaaterskill Falls and to other historic points like Rip Van Winkle's Sleepy Hollow and Sunset Rock.
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3) Palenville - Once a mecca for Hudson Valley artists who sought humble shelter and a base for their hiking and drawing expeditions in the Catskills, this resort village is still quite small and has several structures associated with the artists of the landscape movement.

There are several museums in the region which have collections relating to the Hudson River school. Beginning with those closest to the Cole house, they include:



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- 1) Olana State Historic Site - This Moorish castle-like mansion, built in 1870-1874 by Calvert Vaux for Frederic Edwin Church, is located near Hudson, New York, just across the Rip Van Winkle Bridge from Cole's house. Olana is on a mountain top with commanding views of the Hudson Valley and Catskills. It contains all the original furnishings and paintings by Church and its extensive grounds are well maintained.

The state offers the public a house tour for fifty cents that centers around Church as an artist and the architecture and furnishings of Olana. During 1979, Olana had 90,000 visitors to its grounds and 26,000 visitors on the house tour. The site manager has purposely limited visitation because of the stress it exerted on the resource. Olana is an easy day's trip from metropolitan New York.

- 2) Greene County Historical Society (the Bronck House) - The Greene County Historical Society's collection is derived from the area and so is partly comprised of paintings, drawings and artifacts of the Hudson River school. Among these, they have Cole memorabilia including the following: a beaver hat in a leather hatbox; two sketches, Kaaterskill Clove and Ruins in Italy; one finished oil landscape, untitled and framed; five plaster casts Cole purchased for his studio including a Roman emperor and a discus thrower; a leatherbound trunk with the initials T.C.; a flute in a rosewood box; a zither designed by Cole; a folding sketch chair; a large easel; a large box filled with curios collected by Cole; Cole's sketch box, mahogany brushes and palette knife, the inside cover painted with a Sicilian scene of Greek ruins; and two large volumes of Sicilian scenes purchased by Cole.

The Bronck house is open during late June, July and August only. The Greene County Historical Society has said that if an appropriate public use or museum were to occur at the Cole house, they would be sympathetic to the situation and would perhaps react favorably to a mutually convenient plan for a loan arrangement of these artifacts.

- 3) Albany Institute of History and Art - The Albany Institute is the major art museum of the region and has an impressive collection of Hudson
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River school oils and drawings, not all of which are exhibited due to gallery space limitations. In addition, the Institute's library is a valuable archive for related historical material. As a courtesy to the Silbersteins, the library is temporarily holding many of Cole's personal papers and other items, many of which they have conserved. These papers include: letters sent and received by Cole; sixteen letters of condolence sent on his death; a marriage certificate and Thomas-Maria Cole correspondence from 1836 to 1847; a phrenological opinion of Cole by L.N. Fowler dated 1837; an inventory of Cole's personal estate; exhibition catalogs and invitations from 1829 to 1864; an 1823 sketchbook; an undated scrapbook; and a citizenship certificate dated April 8, 1834, at New York City, among other things.

The Albany Institute has expressed a willingness to participate in some form of loan arrangement of paintings and artifacts to the site, providing appropriate gallery lighting and temperature controls, fire alarm system, transportation arrangements, insurance, and security systems are in place.

- 4) The Jasper Francis Cropsey house - The Cropsey house was recently opened to the public after a private restoration effort by descendents of the artist. It is located two hours away by car in the lower Hudson River area in Hastings-on-Hudson. It is in its first season of visitation, thus no statistics are yet available. This is the only site aside from Olana which commemorates a Hudson River school artist.

### III. THE PAINTER'S LIFE

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#### Early Years and Training

Thomas Cole was born in the industrial midlands of England in 1801, the son of a handicraft manufacturer. He was apprenticed for a while to a calico designer and worked as an engraver's assistant, but his father's business failed and the Coles moved to the United States in 1818.

They settled in Philadelphia and Thomas began working as a journeyman wood engraver, remaining there after his family moved to Steubenville, Ohio. In the fall of 1819, Thomas walked 300 miles across the mountains to join them. Once there, he met an itinerant portraitist and became entranced with the craft. A book the folk artist had of English painting captivated Cole. He recalled, "It was illustrated with engraving and treated of design, composition, color. This book was my constant companion night and day . . . My ambition grew and in my imagination I pictured the glories of being a great painter."

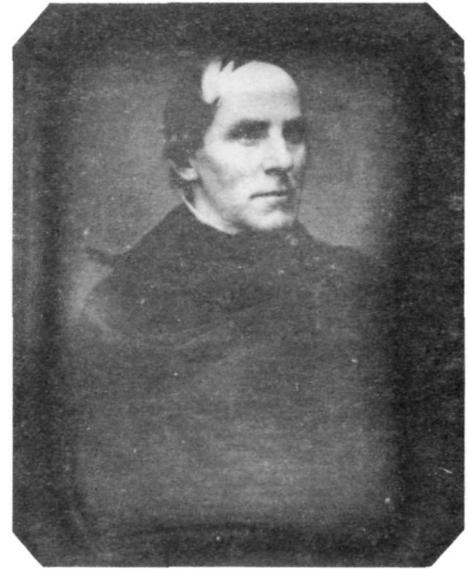
Cole had a spotty early career during the early 1820's, marked by stints as an art teacher, wallpaper designer, writer, and general artist-handyman. He also spent a short term at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art, America's leading art institution. By 1825, Cole had rejected portraiture and academic painting that imitated European expression and the Old Masters. Instead, his painting reflected his love of the American countryside as well as his newly-discovered interest in landscape painting.

#### New York Art Circles and the Hudson River School

Cole moved to New York City and began exploring the Hudson River Valley and nearby Catskill Mountains on summer sketching trips. In 1825, three Cole paintings of Hudson Valley scenes, displayed in a framemaker's window, were discovered by three of America's then most prominent artists, John Trumbull, William Dunlap and Asher Brown Durand.

This recognition was pivotal in the emergence of native American artistic expression. The young nation, after independence and renewed unity following the War of 1812, was eager to assert its own identity politically, economically, technologically, and culturally. New York City, the leading commercial center,

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produced self-consciously American artists like Thomas Cole and Asher Brown Durand, and writers like Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper during these years. The artists organized and managed the marketing of their painting and fiercely protected their New York identity. The urban population was excited by the tangled forests, the ravines and looming mountains, and the American atmosphere and light depicted on the painters' canvases. They quickly bought and popularized art, previously the domain of the wealthy. The artists collectively produced work identifiable as a style and now known as the Hudson River school of landscape painting.

The Hudson River and the opening of the Erie Canal in the watershed year of 1825 gave access to the wilderness of upstate New York. The Catskills, due to their unique location and to urban industrialization which freed vacationers from the workplace, became a center of tourism. The Catskill Mountain House, built in 1824, was America's first resort, a grand Greek Revival hotel built on a mountain top with a sweeping view of the river valley.

The Mountain House stood in the midst of vast expanses of virgin forest. The nearest villages were, in reality, outposts of civilization kept alive by commerce on the Hudson. The Mountain House was reached by riverboat and a wrenching four hour stage ride up the steep mountain. The travelers' reward was a lavish resort, an early nineteenth century mixture of wilderness and luxury less than a day's journey from New York City.

Thomas Cole galvanized the wilderness experience in the popular imagination. He continued to take annual summer pilgrimages from his New York studio to Catskill, New York, for the next decade. Cole lodged in Catskill and hiked extensively in the mountains, especially in nearby Kaaterskill Clove and Platte Clove.

On these outings, he sketched whatever in nature captured his attention, producing detailed studies of trees, rocks, and waterfalls, as well as panoramas of mountains outlined against the sky. He would make notations of color and atmosphere on these sketches. Upon returning to New York in the winter, Cole worked these sketches into large oil paintings, taking whatever elements of the detailed studies pleased him to compose his landscape.

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Cole was a painter, writer, poet, and philosopher who expressed his thoughts easily in all areas. His landscapes were romanticized realistic representations of American nature. He did not record nature so much as transform it by the use of vibrant colors and subtle brush strokes which imbued the landscape with drama and life.

Cole also depicted allegorical subjects, as in Garden of Eden and the Expulsion and Prometheus Bound, using similar techniques to elevate and render the sublime qualities of the composition. Later in life, he painted great allegorical series of three, four, and five canvases related to the same theme. Examples of these enormously popular paintings are The Course of Empire and The Voyage of Life. Engraved reproductions were made of paintings such as these for wide distribution to an eager public, enabling the middle class to have a Thomas Cole hanging in the parlor.

Cole participated prominently in the 1825 revolution in art society. In company with Samuel F. B. Morse, Asher Brown Durand, and others, the National Academy was founded, an enterprise which rebelliously exhibited and sold only works by Americans. Cole was at the nucleus of a group of tight-knit male artists who followed him into the wild scenery of the mid-Hudson to draw and appreciate nature. These men were hikers and climbers for whom, in the words of one art historian, painting was an athletic art.

Cole expressed his feelings about nature in poetry and prose as well. His poetry frequently corresponded to a painting he was working on and each media contained references to the other. He developed a fast friendship at this time with William Cullen Bryant, also a poet, but most significantly a leading editor and observer in America who shared Cole's sentiments. This friendship led Asher Brown Durand to paint Kindred Spirits (cover graphic) of Cole with his hat and walking stick taking Bryant out for a hike near Catskill.

From 1829 to 1832, Cole went abroad, causing a small furor that the champion of American landscape had lost his vision. This was compounded by concern that his now more frequent allegorical subjects were a barometer of his disenchantment with native landscapes. In Europe, Cole visited national

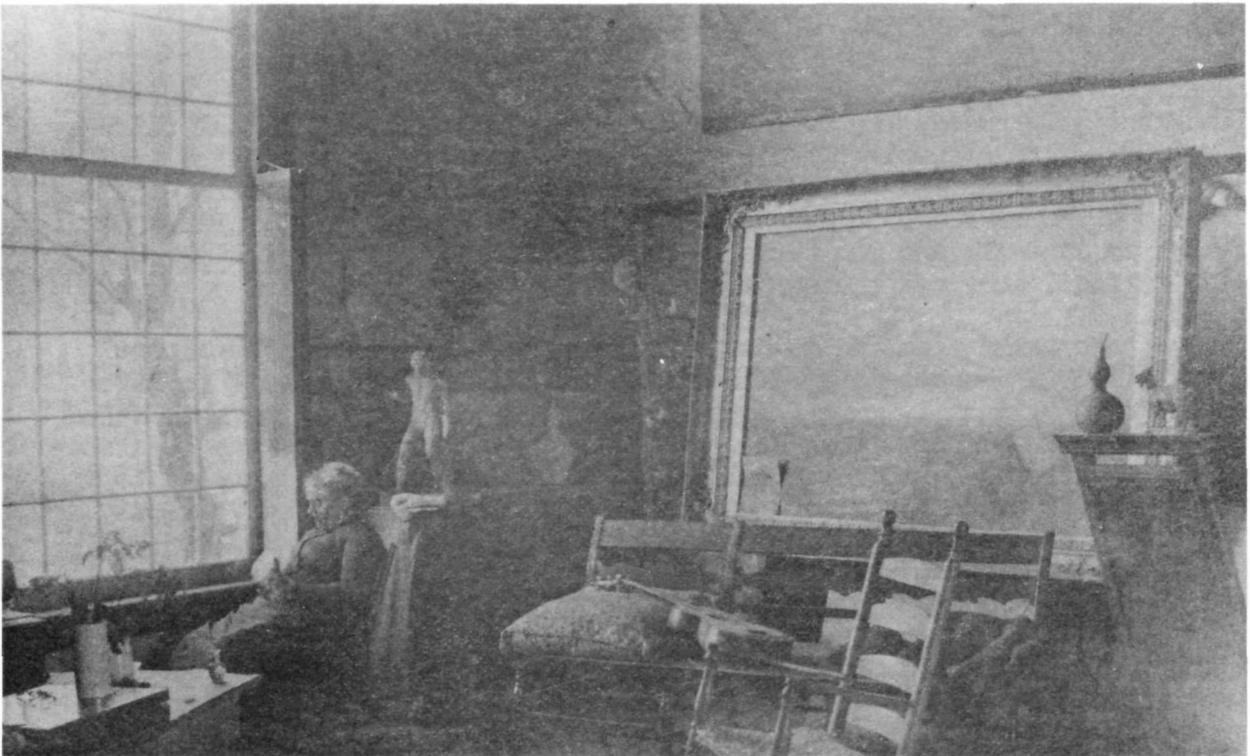
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galleries in England, France, and Italy, all crowded with the revered Old Masters and there renewed his respect for American romantic realism.

### Marriage and Life in Catskill

Cole continued his travels to the mid-Hudson each summer upon his return to New York City. In 1836, he married a young woman named Maria Bartow from Catskill, New York. Cole moved to Cedar Grove where Maria lived with three spinster sisters and her uncle, John Alexander Thomson, the owner of the house. Eventually, the Coles added four children to this household.



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Cole adapted a saltbox-roofed structure just to the rear of the house for his studio. Sunlight filtered into the unfinished interior through a skylight in the roof. Cole used this studio for ten years, from 1836 to 1846, including the period when he took in his sole pupil, Frederic Edwin Church.

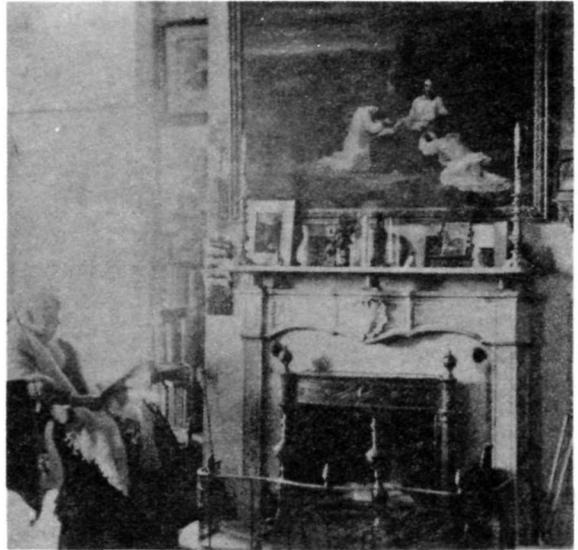
Cole never owned Cedar Grove, although the Coles contributed to the household expenses, and Maria ultimately inherited it with her sisters. At one point, when Thomson needed some cash, Cole tendered him a sizable loan and received as collateral some undeveloped land near the house. When Thomson died in 1846, Cole built a new studio on the land, an Italianate cottage with an enormous window on the north wall. He filled the studio with his easels, canvases, paints, musical instruments, and myriad objects collected during his travels abroad.

Thomas Cole was extremely happy in his marriage and for a time was satisfied with life in Catskill. He continued to market his work and to seek patrons in New York. He was able to sell through the now established National Academy exhibitions and the American Art-Union lotteries. He was a favorite of Luman Reed, an astute merchant who had grown up only a few miles from Catskill and who patronized the Hudson River Valley artists. Reed, in fact, provided the commission for The Course of Empire.

Cole was separated from the mainstream of New York art society by living in Catskill. He became more religious in the country and is said to have drifted into melancholy more frequently from his isolation. Changes around Catskill distressed him, such as the logging, the tourism, and the construction of a railroad, all of which intruded upon nature. Cole traveled to Europe several times for diversion. His paintings became almost entirely allegorical and religious in tenor. Earlier companions were confused by this change in Cole and struck out on their own to paint wilderness in such far-flung places as America's West, Labrador and South America.

By the early 1840's, Cole took another two-year sojourn to Europe seeking inspiration. He was bitter about art critics' attacks on his work and worried about being alienated from potential patrons. The Continental

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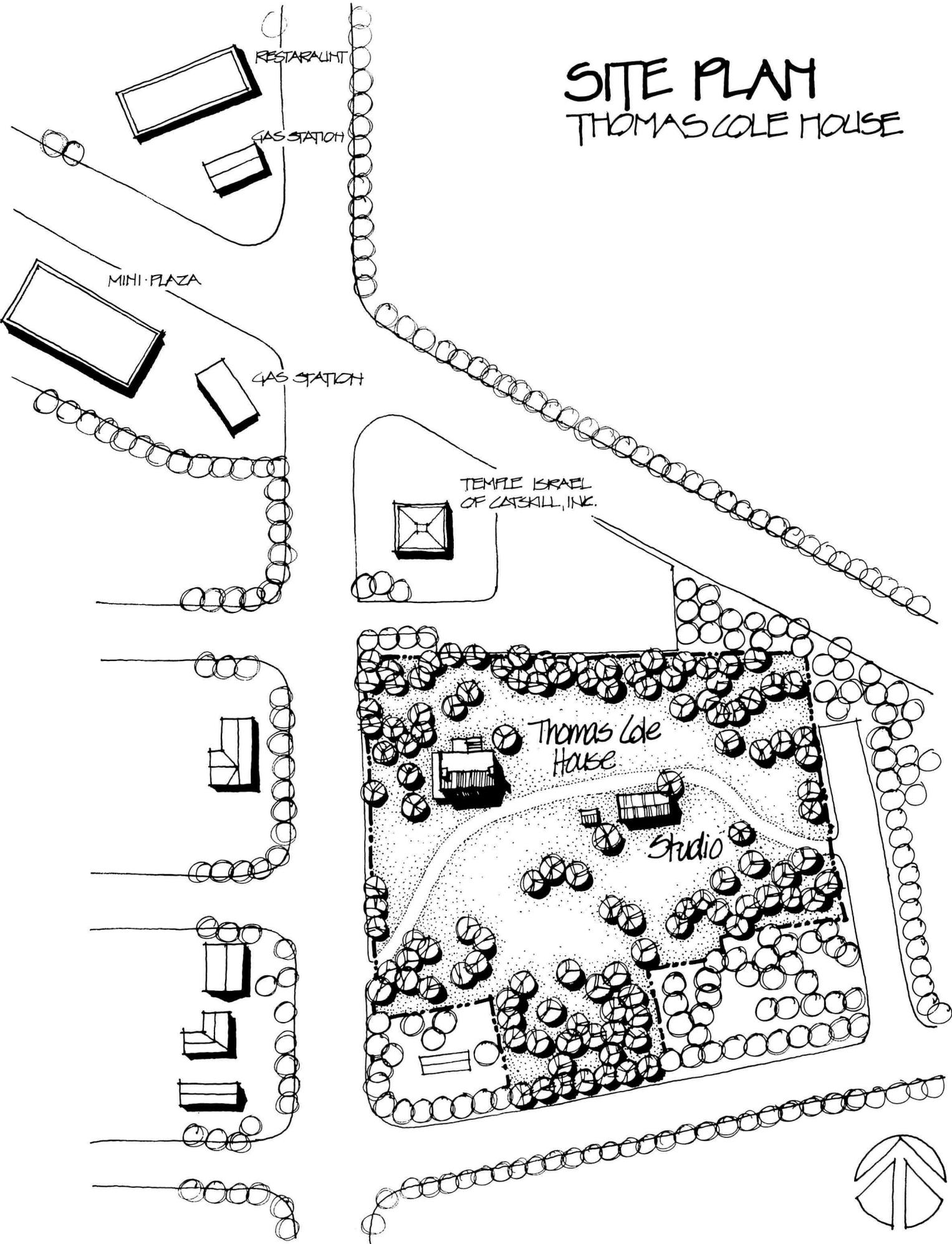
scenery disappointed him, the most dramatic scenery had been painted again and again. Cole felt that the Catskills offered comparable vistas and drama.

He returned to the cultural isolation of Catskill and drew ever more inward. During the last years of his life, he built the new studio and gave in to his melancholy. In 1848, at the age of forty-seven, Cole died of pneumonia, compounded to some degree by his depression. His death elicited outpourings of sadness and eulogies to his work. Cole's symbolic leadership in American art was recognized across the country, and his friend, William Cullen Bryant, delivered the funeral oration.

Shortly after his death, a major Cole retrospective was exhibited in his honor, the first comprehensive showing of the artist's work. Even Cole's old friends and colleagues who knew his work were surprised at the power of the assembled paintings. They reflected on how much Cole had influenced them as he had produced the paintings one by one, conveying his love of American landscape and his spiritual self in them all.

# SITE PLAN

## THOMAS COLE HOUSE



## IV. CURRENT OWNERSHIP AND PUBLIC DEMAND

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The Cole house is currently unoccupied and has a caretaker who lives in a small apartment in the studio building. The Catskill Center bought the Cole house to help preserve what they feel is a nationally significant site from ownership which might be insensitive to the historic and cultural values of the site. They intend to be only an interim owner and are actively seeking an appropriate group or agency to whom they may transfer the property. A condition of their 1979 purchase was obtaining a zoning variance permitting museum and public educational uses at the site.

The Catskill Center is a private, non-profit organization which participates in conservation efforts and land management issues affecting the five county Catskill region. Another thrust of their work is public education. They have been in existence since the 1960's and have only been involved in one previous building preservation effort before acquiring the Cole house.

The Catskill Center has invited National Park Service evaluation of the site in the form of a reconnaissance study. They have also been contacted by a newly-formed regional arts museum. No other potential owners are known of at this point. Other efforts to interest the National Trust and the State of New York were unsuccessful. Endangered properties funding was not forthcoming and the state felt that ownership of Olana and substantial conservation lands containing related sites were a sufficient commitment.

Visitation statistics at Olana and at related sites in the Catskill Mountains would suggest that there is a public demand for the cultural and recreational opportunities these sites offer. A recent major exhibition, American Light, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., has brought the Hudson River school to the forefront of public cultural attention. A prestigious publisher of art books is releasing a limited edition Cole retrospective in the fall of 1980 that will sell for around \$100 per copy. The recent sale of a Church painting The Icebergs, for \$2.5 million, was the highest price ever paid for the work of an American artist and made the Hudson River school a household term. The Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York, is mounting a major exhibition of Cole's drawings and sketches this fall. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is opening its American Wing this summer containing the most extensive nineteenth century American art collection anywhere in which

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the Hudson River school is considered distinguished. In summary, art institutions and academics are reevaluating this first native American painting school, and public interest in it has grown enormously in the recent past.

The Catskill Center has been approached by the Hudson Arts Consortium as a prospective buyer. The Consortium was incorporated by the New York State Board of Regents in October, 1979, to develop a museum specializing in historical and contemporary creative arts of the Hudson River Valley and region. The Consortium then formed the Arts Institute of the Hudson group, also the museum's name, to be their planning and fund raising arm. The Arts Institute wishes to use the Cole site for administrative and archival purposes in conjunction with some gallery space. This site would be one of several they ultimately intend to occupy and would be restricted to historical arts. Their long range plan, subject to negotiations with the Catskill Center, is to purchase and rehabilitate the site according to the museum's needs.

This group is comprised of professionals familiar with the art world. They do not have much experience in public fund raising which will be their main source of income. The Arts Institute would be eligible for National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities funding for programmatic needs. They are in the difficult position of having to raise an enormous amount of money from private sources to get the museum project underway. By their calculation, this would amount to about \$150,000 for land acquisition and \$200,000 for rehabilitation investments. Their annual operating costs would run about \$250,000. (Their projected rehabilitation costs differ significantly from preliminary National Park Service estimates.)

Despite experience in the field and potential sources for their maiden fund raising effort, the Arts Institute is not yet an established non-profit institution with the air of longevity that attracts donors. Without a base of public support, the amount of money they must raise in the first years of operation may undermine or entirely scuttle the project.

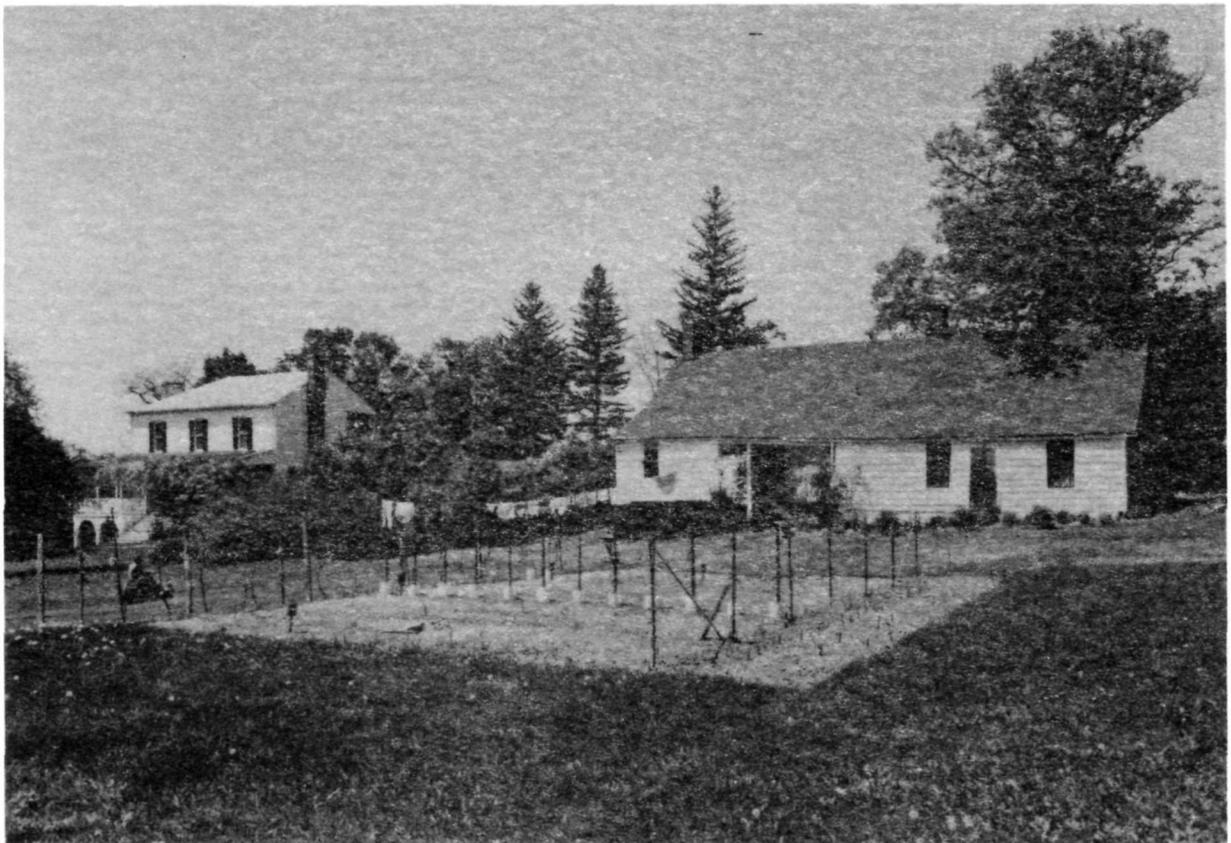
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## V. THREATS TO THE RESOURCE

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The Thomas Cole house faces threats at several levels - potential changes to the house and site, ownership uncertainties and changing conditions in the neighborhood.

In 1979, when the Silbersteins placed the Cole property on the market, their asking price was \$125,000. Within days, the Catskill Center had responded and within two weeks, they were in turn offered up to \$200,000 by a large private



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New York City gallery. The proposed use was an appointment-only gallery for the showing of nineteenth century art to a select clientele.

Conversion to a commercial gallery easily outstrips the residential market for the Cole house today. It offers a prestigious location at an attractive price for a private gallery. Presumably, the zoning change would be easily obtained because this use would contribute taxes and upgrade the property. A gallery could make exterior and interior alterations and would not necessarily comply with the Department of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation because of private financing. This use would leave the house unoccupied for periods of time, increasing the chances of vandalism or arson.

The Catskill Center has stated that they are unable to maintain their investment in the Cole property for longer than two to three years because they would want to recommit the funds to another project. The issue of future ownership and a changed use is unpredictable at this point. Any threats posed by various adaptive reuse scenarios implicit with different ownerships and whatever stress they may exert on the property is also difficult to predict. It is certain to have a measure of protection, no matter who the future owner is because of the preservation restrictions the Catskill Center intends to attach to the deed.

The commercial development nearby at the junction of Spring Street and the bridge approach intrudes on the historic rural character of the Cole house. During warm months when the trees are leafed, the visual intrusion of the gas stations and auto traffic is minimized. This commercial strip development is likely to remain stable because of what appears to be a high commercial failure rate - a mini-plaza of four storefronts at the junction is vacant and another establishment has had several enterprises in it during the past few years.

The residential development immediately adjacent to the site is not experiencing new growth, but does tend towards a relatively high turnover rate. There are currently several properties near the Cole house on the market.

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## VI. RESOURCE PROTECTION

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### Existing

The site has status as a Registered Historic Landmark which makes it eligible for Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service's Grants-in-Aid program on a 50% matching funds basis. This funding source is usually applied to exterior preservation work but may in some cases install new heating and ventilation systems. This program is administered by each state's historic preservation office.

The next deadline for Grants-in-Aid is for fiscal year 1982 applications. It tends to be a very competitive process with many worthy projects seeking support from a shrinking fund. The Cole house will be given preference because as a National Landmark it enjoys an elevated status above individual National Register sites. This priority status is circumscribed by the fact that a quota of 20% of New York's total funds in a given year may be allocated to public buildings. Federal ownership would not preclude access to this funding source if a long-term lessee were managing the site.

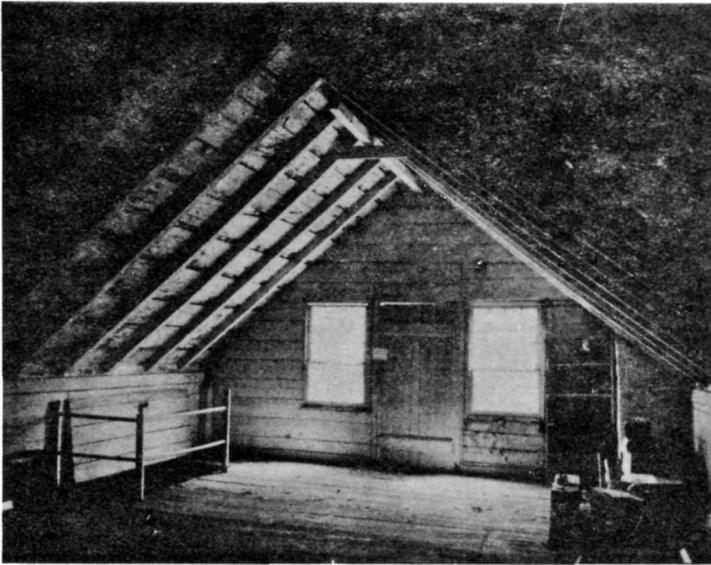
The Tax Reform Act of 1976, and amended in 1978, allows the owner of a National Register commercial property to write off in five years the cost of approved rehabilitation work or else to accelerate depreciation on the property. In addition, the act penalizes commercial property owners who demolish a National Register structure by not permitting the deduction of demolition costs or an accelerated depreciation on the replacement structure.

None of the above incentives has ever been used for rehabilitation purposes at the Thomas Cole house.

### Proposed

The New York State Historic Preservation Office is completing a 1,087 building inventory in Catskill, Hunter, and Palenville, New York, and is in the process of making selections for a National Register Multiple Resource nomination, the object of their research. The nomination is scheduled to be completed in the fall of 1980 and will be based on the Hudson River school and the cultural and historic significance of the

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area. This designation would create historic districts protecting, to some degree, the character of the neighborhood near the Cole house.

The town of Catskill may consider enacting a local preservation ordinance in the near future which would establish an architectural review board. The board would issue certificates of appropriateness for proposed alterations or demolition in the district based on the Department of the Interior's rehabilitation guidelines.

## VII. STATUS OF LAND VALUES

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The Catskill Center is interested in selling the Cole property for an amount that would cover the December, 1979, purchase price of \$125,000 plus interest (on an interest-only, five year mortgage at 9-1/2%), additional carrying costs, service charges, administrative costs, an adjustment for inflation, and taxes (the tax assessor has disregarded the private non-profit status of the Catskill Center and is assessing taxes because no museum is currently operating there).

The intervention of the Catskill Center in site acquisition and an altruistic family decision prevented a dramatic price escalation in the site's market value (further discussed under THREATS TO THE RESOURCE). This escalation is based on a changeover of the property from residential to commercial use. The Catskill Center intends to attach preservation restrictions to the deed which would prevent any extreme development or alterations at the site. Deed restrictions may dampen the price that the Cole house could command on the open market.

## VIII. OPTIONS FOR PRESERVATION OF THE THOMAS COLE HOUSE

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The Thomas Cole house is a resource of national significance. Apart from its National Historic Landmark designation, the Cole house has been identified in the 1965 National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings undertaken for the National Park System Plan. It is listed under the theme Arts and Science, subtheme Romanticism in American Art, 1800-1840, as a site which "possesses exceptional value as commemorating or illustrating the history of the United States." No representative sites in American painting exist within the Park System today. The Cole house offers an opportunity to remedy this gap and to interpret a school of painting as well as the man in the setting which inspired it. This reconnaissance study is the first in-depth evaluation of the site for National Park Service participation in its preservation.

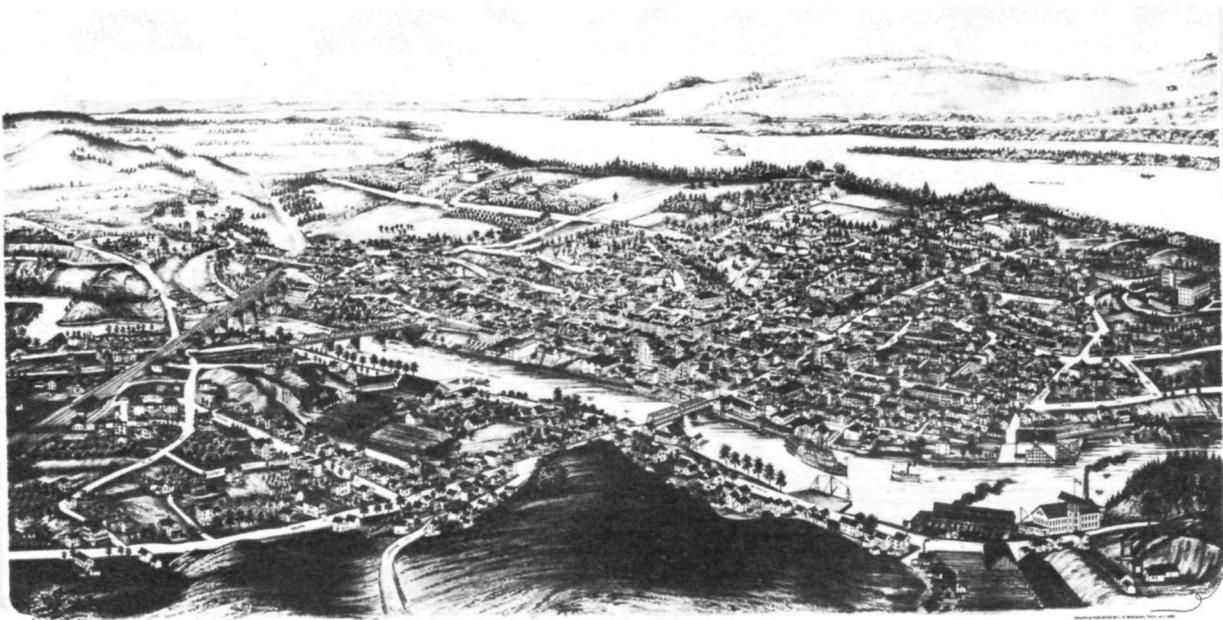
The Cole house today stands on 3.4 acres of landscaped grounds, much reduced from its original 88 acre tract. The studio that Cole used for ten of his twelve years in the Catskills, the house that he lived in, and an outhouse remain. The original house furnishings and Cole paintings are dispersed and irretrievable. The new studio that Cole built and used during the last two years of his life has been demolished, although its site is part of the property.

It is probable that arrangements can be made with art institutions of the region for extended loans to the site of Cole's and other Hudson River artists' works. The loan of some of Cole's possessions, such as his easel, paint box, and drawings now displayed by the Greene County Historical Society, might be arranged.

The setting of the Cole house has been compromised by strip commercial development near its north border, but the periphery of the property is heavily vegetated providing a partial visual and noise buffer. The village of Catskill has incorporated preservation into their planning and will, in the near future, establish two National Register preservation districts, including the Cole house. This should reinforce the historic character of the area through tax breaks and other similar incentives.

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The presence of Olana across the river, the spectacular home of Frederic Edwin Church, presents an interesting counterpoint to the Cole house. They were teacher and student for a time, representing the founding and flowering of the Hudson River school. Both men chose to live in the Mid-Hudson vicinity, a prime source of artistic inspiration to each. Cole lived much more simply but while he was eminently well known in America, he did not achieve the considerable commercial success that Church and his generation of painters did.



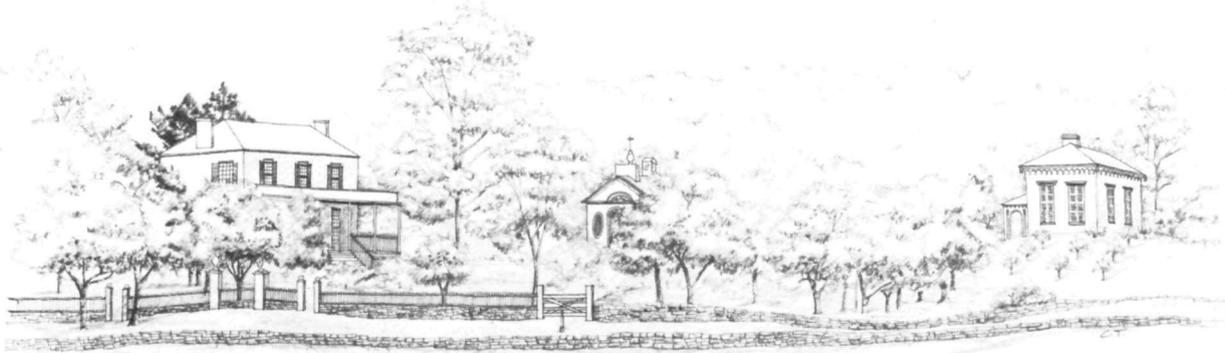
## CATSKILL, N. Y.

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- 2. Bank of the Hudson
- 3. Bank of the Catskill
- 4. Bank of the Delaware
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The Catskills, visible from both painters' homes, are easily accessible from the village via the historic Catskill Turnpike, a two-lane, scenic highway that weaves through ravines into the mountains. The boundary of the Catskill Park is crossed near Palenville, nine miles away, and the visitor encounters hundreds of acres of wilderness managed by New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation. Within this forest land, America's first wilderness, are a multitude of sites that Hudson River School artists hiked, sketched, and painted.

This study attempts to work with the considerable local interest and resources in developing a series of options for preservation of the site. This local initiative is an asset to the Cole house. In an era when the National Park Service is experiencing a growth in the number of sites and a decreasing fund from which to develop them, local commitment can be decisive in a creative planning approach. This is a critical juncture in determining the future use of this property. The transfer from the family's ownership to an interim owner seeking a public use that commemorates Thomas Cole allows the National Park Service and other agencies or groups to evaluate a possible role. The several options for National Park Service participation are as follows:

- 1) No involvement on the part of the National Park Service.

Should the National Park Service decide against any participation in the preservation of the Cole site, the Catskill Center will examine other ownership prospects. The most concrete at this point is the Arts Institute of the Hudson (AIH). The AIH would have to raise a considerable amount of money as a new organization which has not yet had the time to establish a broad base of public support. The fund raising effort might take longer than the Catskill Center may feel is feasible to retain ownership of the property.

The Catskill Center would then probably choose to place the Cole property back on the market with preservation restrictions attached to the deed. Restrictions of this sort would prevent any future private or commercial owner from altering the architectural character of the structures, protect

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significant interior features, and also limit both changes to the grounds and new construction on the property. The use of the site would probably change from residential to commercial.

## 2) Affiliated Area Status

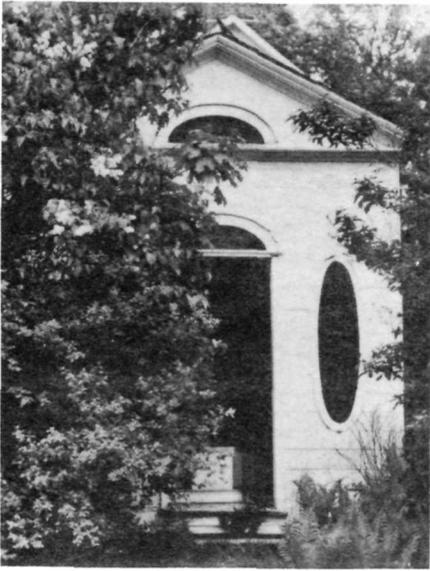
Affiliated area status enables significant areas that are not federally owned or directly administered by the National Park Service to utilize National Park Service resources for preservation. Some of these areas are recognized by Acts of Congress and others have been designated national historic sites by the Secretary of the Interior under the Historic Sites Act of 1935. All affiliated areas draw on technical or financial assistance from the National Park Service.

Affiliated area status would enable the Park Service to provide the Arts Institute of the Hudson (AIH) or other group with financial and technical assistance in their rehabilitation of the site. It may also enable appropriation of money for operations. It does not provide for land acquisition or administration funds. Funding for the affiliated area appears as a line item in the Congressional budget and might run a greater risk of not receiving an appropriation than would a full-fledged National Park Service site.

The National Park Service is able to conduct background research on historic buildings and provide architectural services to an affiliated area in a rehabilitation effort. This sharing of technical expertise may also include the financing of all or a portion of the work. In addition, the National Park Service may, through a cooperative agreement with the AIH or other group, provide assistance in program development and in visitor services. This would assist the AIH in offering a strong interpretive program to the public on Cole and the Hudson River school.

Land acquisition and rehabilitation money is also available from Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service through the State Historic Preservation Office. Again, this is an extremely competitive fund and has recently been subject to federal budget cuts.

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The AIH intends to develop its income from private foundation grants and from a computerized mailing campaign soliciting donations from individuals. Initially, they can expect program funding from the State Department of Education as well as program and personnel funding from the New York State Council on the Arts. These sources provide seed grants and expect the recipients to ultimately become self-supporting. The National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities also provides grants for special projects of the variety that AIH has in mind.

3) National Park Service Site Ownership and Management by Cooperative Agreement.

Under this scenario, the National Park Service would acquire the Thomas Cole site and execute the rehabilitation planning and work. The Park Service would also design and install exhibitry and provide all visitor services. By cooperative agreement, the AIH or other group would be responsible for all administrative and maintenance needs at the site as well as their own programmatic needs. The cooperating association would restrict their program at the Cole site to themes related to the Hudson River school.

This plan would guarantee a long-term preservation of the site by virtue of an expanded Park Service role; that is, ownership, rehabilitation, and the provision of visitor services. It would also enable a cooperating association to get through the difficult financial period of their first years by channeling money into programming and operations instead of into land acquisition and rehabilitation, spreading money too thin. The Park Service presence at the site would greatly enhance the initial credibility of a fledgling association and make their fund raising an easier task.

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"The land forms in the mid-Hudson valley region . . . became an archetype for natural beauty, a model for parkland acquisition and for landscape architecture. The artists that we associate with the Hudson River school came to this very area, and the landscape they identified as beautiful, the scale they found, the quality of the shrubbery, the clusterings, the groupings, the hills, the slopes, the contours, the full dimensions of the physical landscape became a prime example of what would be considered attractive in nature. Their works provided the images that people had before them in terms of reproductions, images of a kind of pastoral ideal. This mid-Hudson region is a land area that has broad cultural and national significance."

Testimony of Alan Gossow presented to  
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission  
and New York State Board on Electric  
Generation Siting and the Environment.  
March 2, 1979

## IX. APPENDICES

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### Factual Data on the Thomas Cole House

1. Jurisdictional area:

New York State, Greene County

2. Working title assigned to site:

Thomas Cole House  
218 Spring Street  
Catskill, New York 12414

3. Description of general pattern of land ownership, gross acreage, and estimate of land values and principal use:

The site is approximately 3.4 acres. It is owned by a private non-profit corporation who purchased the site from the descendents of Thomas Cole in December, 1979. The house is currently unoccupied while a long-term owner is sought who will put the property to a sympathetic use related in some way to the legacy of Thomas Cole. Structures on the property include the house, a studio, a small garage and an outhouse.

4. General geographic description of the site including demographic data:

The Cole house was built by Thomas T. Thomson as Cedar Grove in 1815 to 1816 on approximately 88 acres of land lying between the Hudson River and Albany and Greene Turnpike. Now known as Spring Street, it is a residential street lined by older, mostly Victorian frame houses. Land sold from the Cedar Grove estate has been subdivided with modern bungalows, cutting the Cole house off from its river frontage. Nearby, the approach road to the Rip Van Winkle Bridge intersects with Spring Street and has led to some commercial development (gas stations, restaurants, shops). A synagogue occupies an adjacent lot, within view of the Cole house. The Catskill Mountains are visible ten miles to the west.

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5. Principal resource characteristics:

Brick house with wood frame rear and associated frame studio and out-buildings on a 3.4 acre landscaped site.

6. What significant natural, scenic, recreational, fish and wildlife, or historic values are known to exist on the site? Is the area or parts of it a registered natural or historic landmark? Has it been treated in a theme study? Is a theme study scheduled? When?

The house, studio, and grounds were placed on the National Register in 1965 as a National Historic Landmark. The site and Thomas Cole were further identified by the National Park Service in the 1965 National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings under theme XX, Arts and Sciences, subtheme Painting and Sculpture. This study evolved into the inclusion of the Cole site in the National Park System Plan of 1972. No sites commemorating painters presently exist.

No theme study appears to have been scheduled, although some obvious themes are the Hudson River school of landscape painting, native American Art and Romanticism, and the development of a conservation ethic and wilderness appreciation in the United States.

7. The potential of the site for recreation and/or protection of open space or natural or cultural values.

The site has potential for the protection of cultural values.

8. What are the present and planned uses and to what extent are they consistent with the perpetuation of those values?

The present owners, The Catskill Center, have stated that their intention is to act as a conservator and catalyst in working with local, state, and federal interests in an effort to develop a plan for the public use and preservation of the Cole property. This effort is consistent with the perpetuation of the site's cultural values. However, the Catskill Center is financially willing to

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retain ownership for about two years, at which time if no viable owner and use or sure prospect for the site has emerged, they will choose to return the property to the open market with preservation deed restrictions. This situation may compromise the cultural values of the site.

9. Distance of the site from densely populated areas and the effect of uses, if any, emanating from these areas and their effect on the site:

The Cole house is located in the rural village of Catskill (population 5,800, surrounding township 13,000) on the west bank of the Hudson River about 32 miles south of Albany. It is a comfortable day's trip from the New York City metropolitan area by car or train, about 145 miles away. Traffic as well as residential and commercial development nearby have compromised the site's rural quality.

10. Describe the accessibility of the site to the population of the area (i.e., pedestrian, auto, public transportation, etc.):

The site is easily accessible by auto and by public transportation (bus). Eight Amtrak trains daily connect Hudson, New York, across the river from Catskill, to Albany and New York City.

11. Has the site been identified as a significant natural, cultural, or recreational area or open space meriting protection?

Yes.

12. If yes, by whom and when? Have plans been proposed for its protection?

The site was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965 by the National Park Service. A solution for the long-term ownership and public use of the Cole house is currently being sought by its interim owner, the Catskill Center. (See 6 above.)

The State Historic Preservation Office of New York is preparing a multiple resource nomination to the National Register which will include

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the Cole house and two districts as well as other isolated sites. The nomination is based on the concentration of Hudson River school painters' activities in and around Greene County in the mid-Hudson region and nearby Catskill Mountains. It seeks protection for known sites of artists' residences and studios and for various scenic vistas that they painted. Expected submission date is fall, 1980.

13. Is all or part of the site now part of an approved plan of a public agency with full or partial capability to provide recreation and resource protection (i.e., as a secondary use)?

No public plan exists for the Cole site.

If so, does it have a high priority ranking that may permit its protection within the next five years, based on current financial expectations and management capabilities?

Not applicable.

14. By whom and for what use is the site zoned or otherwise protected?

The Thomas Cole property was zoned single family residential until the Catskill Center applied for and obtained a variance as a condition of sale. The current zoning classification permits use of the site for educational purposes or as a museum.

15. Is a change of zoning classification now pending on all or part of the site?

No.

16. If yes, what new use is sought and when is it expected to be acted upon?

Not applicable.

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17. For what purposes is the site now being used?

No current use while future of site is being resolved.

18. For what future purposes is the site being considered, and by whom?

The National Park Service is undertaking a reconnaissance study of the site. Interest in the site has been expressed by the Hudson Arts Consortium as a possible location for a museum they are founding which specializes in historical and contemporary creative arts of the Hudson River Valley and environs. The Consortium was incorporated in 1979 by the New York State Board of Regents. They have since established the Arts Institute of the Hudson to be their policy making and fund raising body. They propose to use the Cole property as one of several Arts Institute locations; this site to be devoted to administrative and archival functions with limited gallery space.

19. How would you describe the general development pressures on the site?

At this time, there does not seem to be development pressure in the proximity of the site. Pressure for conversion to a commercial use appears probable if the property is placed back on the open market. Within two weeks of the Cole property appearing on the market in 1979, the owners were tendered offers well in excess of their asking price. Several large New York galleries expressed an interest in using the site as an appointment-only gallery for showings of nineteenth century American art to a select clientele.

20. Current price escalation of land acquisition.

Appraised valuation of the Cole house in September 1979 was \$130,000, broken down as follows: \$100,000 for the subject property as a residence plus a 30% increment due to its historical associations, itemized as follows: National Historic Landmark designation, proximity to Olana, the Frederic Church residence now a successful tourist attraction, and its excellent location for a museum or gallery.

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The future asking price for the Cole property would include its December, 1979, sale price of \$125,000 plus interest (on an interest-only, five year mortgage at 9-1/2%), additional carrying costs, service charges, administrative costs, an adjustment for inflation, and taxes (the local tax assessor has disregarded the non-profit status of the Catskill Center and is assessing taxes because no museum is currently operating there).

21. To what extent is, or could, the area be protected under existing federal, state, or local controls and authorities?

National Landmark designation affords protection against adverse actions employing federal funds. A pending multiple resource nomination to the National Register would assist in preserving the historic character of the Spring Street neighborhood.

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## Statement of Significance

### COLE AND ROMANTICISM

When Thomas Cole launched his career in New York with three startling landscape pictures, he helped to bring American art into the mainstream of modern thought and ideas about the natural world. The Romantic view of nature was overturning man's previous idea of living separated and cut off from the environment. Our first settlers, the Puritans, even though they had a fortunate feel for common natural events, generally saw nature as a reflection of original sin and corruption; since man was in need of redemption and grace, his natural home was a place to be restored to its original condition of Eden. The Puritans did their best to subdue the wilderness and convert it from a savage state into a purified landscape. As the nation grew and civilization spread out along the coast, the eighteenth century colonial American and the makers of the political revolution supported their claims for independence by appeal to the rational and cultured mind of man to organize nature according to reasonable principles. The founding fathers were, above all, "gentlemen", just like their English counterparts, and prided themselves on their ability to make sound governments and orderly political bodies. To them, nature was only beautiful if everything in it fell into place and yielded to the hand of man. In the eighteenth century, nature was a decorated ornament to life and not a controller of our fates.

In Europe, the Romantic view of nature was starting to grow under the influence of new artistic and political ideas. Edmund Burke's essay on the sublime and the beautiful spoke for the appreciation of wilderness scenes which evoked awe and wonder for grand and untouchable spaces. Jean-Jacques Rousseau changed attitudes about our view of mankind and emphasized the value of experience over logic and sensitivity over developed culture. The Romantic saw nature as a school in which man learned about himself and helped him return to a state of innocence. Man saw himself as a participant in a scheme larger than one of his own making. The Romantics studied hard in this new school because they were beginning to reeducate themselves with clear minds receptive to creative forces.

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Thomas Cole's contribution to this movement was to insure that American Romanticism in the visual arts distinguished itself from Europe by defining an experience unique to this country. Our visual revolution followed our political break from England by at least thirty years, but when it did, American art reflected a democratic spirit and appreciation for native locales. Cole was one of the first American painters to rebel against the old style of landscape painting, common in Europe, which required soft, ordered settings including idealized pastoral figures in the manner of Claude or Poussin. He painted a nature untouched by human cultivation, something wild, noble and panoramic. Because he believed in the power of his own visual experience, he set out every summer on foot to the Catskills and recorded his visions of the New World as it really was. Cole saw nature as a mixture of good and evil forces, largely mysterious but always touched by the hand of a creator. Generally, he excluded human figures from his paintings, or if he did include them, they seemed to be just another part of the organic life of the wilderness or small intruders in vast, free areas.

European taste in art was based on a pride in continental scenery because of its long association with historical events and achievements. Every corner of Europe could lay claim to the commemoration of some past national glory. Consequently, foreign critics admired only landscapes which recalled the past life of their country. The Romantic movement was allying itself with a rise in nationalistic feelings. Since America was still a new country and had yet to prove itself, American landscapes were considered inferior because they lacked a reference point in the imaginations of the people. Cole and his followers countered these arguments by declaring that the American scene animated the mind by making the viewer think of the future instead of the past. American Romanticism, which flourished in the 1830's and 1840's, along with the rest of the country, was progressive and forward looking. Cole defended the Catskills precisely because they were uncivilized. No part of Europe had escaped the modifications of a crowded society; America offered freedom for the expansion of the mind. The wilderness was new because it had never been seen before or disturbed, and yet it was original and forceful, preceding human history.

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At home, native Americans responded enthusiastically to this new art which gave them pictures of their own spirits and thoughts. They liked to admire their own energy and were encouraged by the optimism of the Hudson River school of painting which Cole founded. Because of these paintings, Americans began to explore the region around New York for themselves, and they hung the pictures up on their walls.

#### THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL

The Hudson River school of Cole, Asher B. Durand, Frederic Church, John Kensett, Worthington Whittredge and others shared a common belief in the spiritual importance of their work. The Romantic painters found a religious mood in their subjects, and they expressed the divinity living in the forests. The purpose of art, they believed, was to develop the particular reverence for their craft and its techniques. Pre-Romantic paintings were designed to illustrate the power of the painter to give the viewer a sense of respect for the hand on the brush. The Romantics focused their techniques on the scene before them with meticulous detail and accuracy so that the viewer felt himself in the presence of an actual landscape instead of painted canvas. They followed nature closely because it was the wilderness itself, objectively represented, which modified our spiritual well being and not the ideal and artificial landscapes of the eighteenth century.

A typical painting from the Hudson River school shows a withered tree in the foreground and voluminous detail in the bushes and trees surrounding it, shaded in darker tones. As the view recedes towards the distance, light in the picture gradually lifts and clarifies revealing a secure middle ground, often with a pool or water fall. The farther view of the painting rises on a heavily wooded mountain or group of hills that seems beyond our reach. The sky and light provide a final backdrop that draws the viewer continually upward into more hopeful values and experiences.

But the Hudson River school did not paint only landscapes, and their influence extended beyond the Catskills. They were united in their rejection of portrait painting as the staple of the artist's production. Instead, their

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human figures were groups of people engaged in common actions reflecting American life as in the paintings of William Sidney Mount. The Hudson River painters liked to think of themselves as self-taught artists, inspired purely by the worth of their subjects, even though many of them travelled to Europe to learn from French and German masters. When they returned, however, they always rekindled their inspirations with a trip into the actual wilderness.

The creation of a new art created new circumstances for the marketing of paintings. Hudson River artists enjoyed the lucky situation of being in control of the sale and exhibition of their work. They founded the National Academy of Fine Arts after the older institution, the American Academy, refused to give way to their new ideas and values. For the first time, artists themselves produced, exhibited and sold their own works. They established gallery shows that were lit by gaslight so that people could view their paintings after business hours. They were successful in attracting huge crowds and people bought their works almost as quickly as they could be painted. Because of their tremendous success, the art center of the country became permanently settled in New York instead of in the conservative cities of Boston and Philadelphia. In every respect, the pre-Civil War period was a golden age for the artistic community.

#### THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL'S IMPACT IN AMERICA

The Hudson River school influenced other American painters of the period. Their Romantic quest for travel to actual locations and their faithfulness to correct detail became a feature of the Rocky Mountain painters and artists of the plains area. Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Hill, and Thomas Moran were the first to explore the visual beauties of the great canyons and valleys of the west with a sense of discovery later emulated by the modern photographer, Ansel Adams. Moran's paintings Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and Chasm of the Colorado so excited Congressional legislators that they were virtually responsible for the creation of our national park system. One of our ablest historians, Francis Parkman, was also influenced by the Hudson River aesthetic.

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His monumental History of France and England in North America is an example of painting in prose according to Romantic ideals. Parkman made extensive journeys into the wilderness to describe in a rich vocabulary the settings for our colonial history. His work put an end to charges that American landscape painting lacked association with past glories as he recorded the battles and developments of colonization in Canada and the northeast against the backdrop of the woods and rivers. In his own words, the history of foreign settlement in America is really a "history of the American forest."

Because of their understanding that the United States is, as Perry Miller says, "Nature's Nation", Cole and the Hudson River school were our first conservationists. They painted with a tremendous respect for the environment and a consciousness that the wilderness, as they knew it, would eventually give way to a spreading civilization. Their paintings and writings testify to their belief that a permanent record be preserved for future generations to insure our consciousness of the great spiritual forces which helped to build the United States. Even in their own time, they saw trees falling to the axe and lamented the passing of an important natural resource. To these artists, the wilderness was not only a place for recreation or simple escape from urban pressures, but a valuable teacher of how life could be lived by a large population looking for new freedoms. Politically, our independence had been effected in terms of rebellion against a harsh absentee government. But culturally and spiritually, our freedom had to be a matter of conscious personal creation reflecting our individual character. American history has a different style from European history because it begins and continues with a powerful meeting between man and nature which Cole and his followers put on their canvases. As Wallace Stegner, one of our contemporary novelists, has said, "An American, insofar as he is new and different at all, is a civilized man who has renewed himself in the wild."

Statement of Significance contributed  
by writer Robert Reinhard

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Type all entries - complete applicable sections)

|                  |      |
|------------------|------|
| STATE:           |      |
| COUNTY:          |      |
| FOR NPS USE ONLY |      |
| ENTRY NUMBER     | DATE |

1. NAME

COMMON: Thomas Cole House

AND/OR HISTORIC:

2. LOCATION

STREET AND NUMBER: 218 Spring Street

CITY OR TOWN: Catskill

STATE: New York      CODE: 36      COUNTY: Greene      CODE: 039

3. CLASSIFICATION

| CATEGORY<br>(Check One)  | OWNERSHIP  | STATUS   | ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC   |
|--|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> District <input type="checkbox"/> Building<br><input type="checkbox"/> Site <input type="checkbox"/> Structure<br><input type="checkbox"/> Object | <input type="checkbox"/> Public<br><input type="checkbox"/> Private<br><input type="checkbox"/> Both   | Public Acquisition:<br><input type="checkbox"/> In Process<br><input type="checkbox"/> Being Considered  | <input type="checkbox"/> Occupied<br><input type="checkbox"/> Unoccupied<br><input type="checkbox"/> Preservation work in progress |
| PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)   |  |  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural<br><input type="checkbox"/> Commercial<br><input type="checkbox"/> Educational<br><input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment             | <input type="checkbox"/> Government<br><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial<br><input type="checkbox"/> Military<br><input type="checkbox"/> Museum | <input type="checkbox"/> Park<br><input type="checkbox"/> Private Residence<br><input type="checkbox"/> Religious<br><input type="checkbox"/> Scientific | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation<br><input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) _____<br>_____<br>_____                        |

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

OWNER'S NAME:

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN:      STATE:      CODE:

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC:

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN:      STATE:      CODE:

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE OF SURVEY:

DATE OF SURVEY:       Federal     State     County     Local

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN:      STATE:      CODE:

STATE:

COUNTY:

ENTRY NUMBER

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

(ORIGINAL INVENTORY, REVISION UNDERWAY)

THOMAS COLE HOUSE, NEW YORK

Location: 218 Spring Street, Catskill, Greene County

Ownership: Mrs. Milt Dean Hill, 7111 East Chaparral Road,  
Scottsdale, Arizona

Significance

Thomas Cole is one of America's notable landscape and allegorical painters of the first half of the nineteenth century. The Hudson River School, which is receiving renewed attention today, sprang up, in great part, because of Cole's work, and his landscapes remain exemplars of that school of painting.

Cole's artistic career began at an early age. Born in Bolton-le-Moor, Lancashire, England, on February 1, 1801, he became an apprentice as a youth to a designer of calico prints. He also engaged in wood engraving before moving with his family to the United States after the War of 1812. Cole's father migrated to Steubenville, Ohio, following a business failure in Philadelphia, and Cole joined his family there in 1819 upon returning from a voyage to the West Indies. An itinerant painter who visited Steubenville aroused Cole's interest in paintings and by February, 1822, the would-be artist had set out to find sitters. The lack of commissions eventually discouraged Cole, who returned to Steubenville. When his family moved to Pittsburgh in the spring of 1823, he accompanied them and soon resumed his interest in art. The beauty of nature now intrigued him, and as he sketched landscapes and trees, he decided that he really wanted to be an artist. Thus he travelled to Philadelphia to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Dire poverty beset him in Philadelphia, and he

lived on little more than bread and water. He was so poor that he had to use a table cloth to cover himself at night as he slept on a floor. His fortunes improved when he moved to New York in 1825, where three landscapes that he had done on a trip to the Catskill Mountains attracted attention. Colonel John Trumbull was one of those who recognized Cole's ability and generously backed the young artist, introducing him to other painters. Cole's sudden success brought him a new prosperity, and he never again suffered as he had during his bleak Philadelphia period.

Unlike many other painters of his era, Cole was not a flamboyant personality. He possessed a shy and sensitive nature, disliking large gatherings and boisterous occasions. In November, 1836, he married Maria Bartow, which proved to be a happy union. She used to read to him as he painted, probably choosing works that appealed to his religious nature. His religious belief was very strong, and it helped to turn him from pure landscape to allegory in painting.

Although Cole never entirely abandoned natural scenes, he, after 1830, turned increasingly to literary painting. Up until 1830, however, his love of nature fed his artistic prowess, and he became particularly enamored with the Catskill Mountains, settling permanently in Catskill in 1826. His close communion with the beauties of the region stimulated some of his best landscapes, which depicted the grandeur of the sky, field and forest. His two trips to Europe, in the early 1830's and again in the early 1840's, led to an increasing concentration on allegorical scenes, but some pure landscapes continued to be produced. He painted "In the Catskills" in 1837, a picture based on his favorite walk along the mountain-bordered Catskill Creek, and in it nature is portrayed with realism, understanding and feeling. The need for money necessitated further landscape scenes in the 1840's and at that time he produced what is perhaps his masterpiece, "The Ox-Bow", a Massachusetts scene.

The timelessness of "The Ox-Bow" contrasts sharply with the dated character of Cole's allegories. Even before Cole travelled to Europe in 1829, he and others had recognized that his style might be endangered by what he saw abroad. William Cullen Bryant wrote a poem, "To Cole, the Painter, Departing for Europe", warning the artist to preserve his own vision; and Cole himself wrote an admonitory line about Europe, "Lure me (not) from nature's purer love divine."<sup>1</sup> All to no avail! England and France left him largely unscarred, he thinking British and French painting "either too violent or too voluptuous,"<sup>2</sup> but Italy, like too much wine, overwhelmed him. The peninsula's ruins especially thrilled Cole, and in conjunction with his religious feeling, they diverted him from his former realism. He became fascinated with the transitoriness of life and upon his return to the United States in 1832 immediately set to work upon "The Course of Empire". This work consisted of five large pictures and depicted the rise and fall of an empire, with the story dominating the composition. The public applauded "The Course of Empire" when it was completed in 1836, and Cole earned almost \$1,000 from showing it. Additional allegories followed, the "Voyage of Life" in four large panels being noteworthy. The "Voyage" represented the four stages of man, and although some lamented Cole's story telling, the mass audience continued to welcome such works. A second trip to Europe in 1841 did nothing to lessen Cole's enthusiasm for the grand subject, especially after climbing Mt. Etna and contemplating the ruins in Sicily. Having already rejected suggestions that he abandon allegorical scenes, which advice he referred to as "the buzz of dirt flies", and having also rejected the idea of being

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in James T. Flexner, That Wilder Image (Boston, 1962), 45, 46.

<sup>2</sup>Frederick A. Sweet, The Hudson River School (New York, 1945), 60.

"a mere leaf painter"<sup>3</sup>, Cole, on his return to America, remained entranced by the cycle of life as well as with ruins. When he died on February 11, 1848, he left another epic, "The Cross of the World," unfinished.

#### Present Condition of the Site

The Cole house is an attractive brick building that has been little altered since its construction in 1812-1814. Perhaps the greatest change concerns the kitchen, which was added about seventy-five years ago. Otherwise, the house is as Cole knew it, there even being much of his furniture in the building. The painter's paint box is still in the living room and numerous of his paintings are hung throughout the house. Especially interesting is Cole's bedroom, from which one has a wonderful view of the Catskill Mountains, the mountains Cole loved. The paintings and furnishings in the Cole house were recently placed in auction. It is not known how many items were sold.

References: Samuel Isham, The History of American Painting (New York, 1927), 218, 221-226; Eugen Neuhaus, The History and Ideals of American Art (Stanford, 1931), 69-70; Clara F. Sears, Highlights Among the Hudson River Artists (Boston, 1947), 93-94; Frederick A. Sweet, The Hudson River School (New York, 1945), 55, 57, 60-63, 66-67; James Thomas Flexner, That Wilder Image. The Paintings of America's Nature School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer (Boston, 1962), 5-9, 13, 19-20, 44-46, 49-50, 52, 54, 57-58.

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<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Flexner, Wilder Image, 54.

# STUDY TEAM

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## STUDY TEAM

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Publication of this document should not be construed as representing either approval or disapproval of the Secretary of the Interior. The purpose of this document is to provide information for further consideration of the area as a potential submission to the Congress in compliance with section 8 of the General Authorities Act of 1970 as amended by Public Law 94-458.

United States Department of the Interior/National Park Service

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