

HUDSON RIVER VILLAS

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THE LOCUSTS

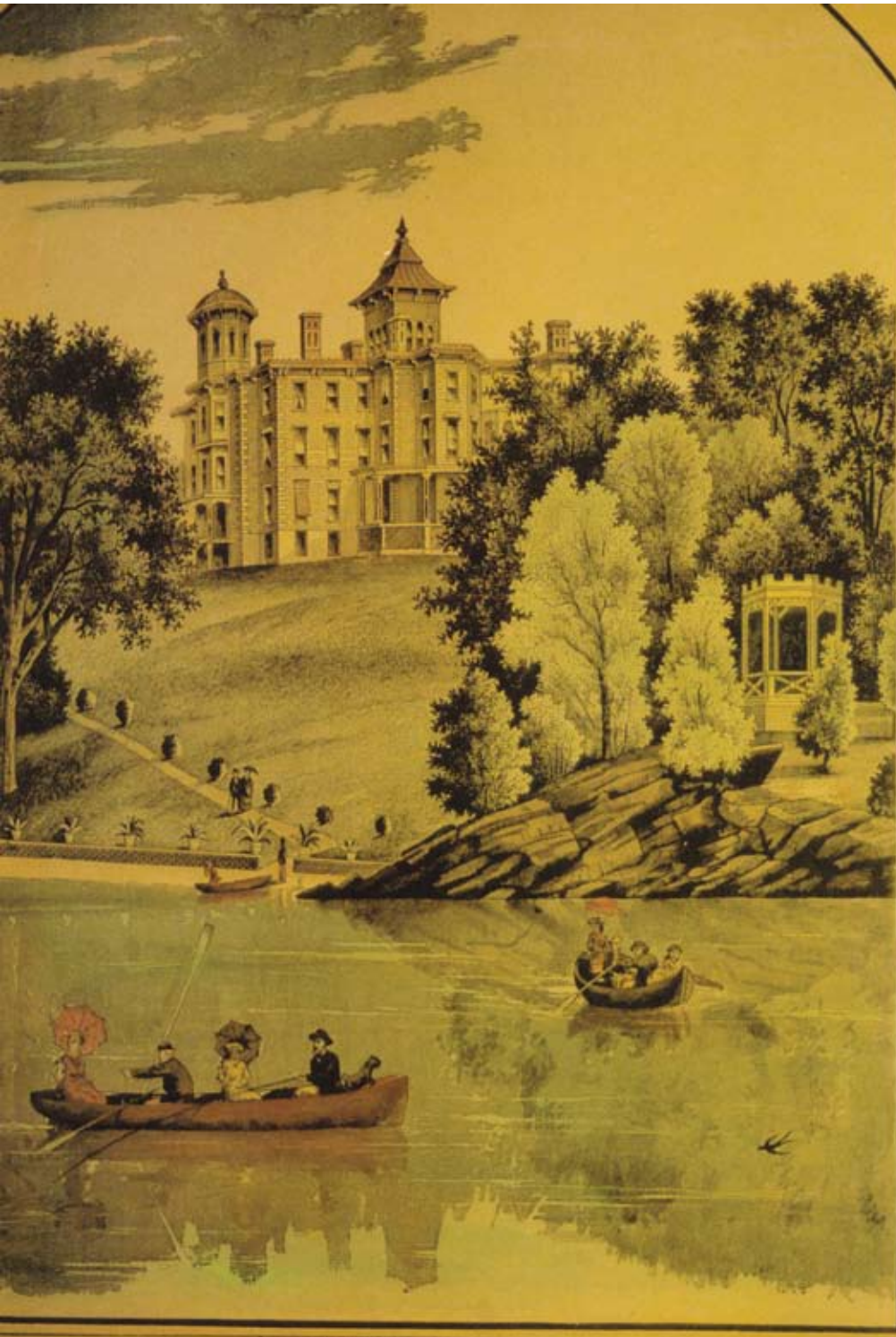
Staatsburg

In 1835 William Emmet purchased a modest farmstead in Staatsburg. Emmet, a wealthy New Yorker, converted the agricultural land to a country estate with the aid of James Downing (no relation to Andrew Jackson Downing), a landscape gardener who laid out the site plan and worked on the property until he retired in 1857. Emmet also had a large stone house built by an unknown architect in an Early Gothic Revival style on the bluff. This building was succeeded by two other houses on the same site.

William B. Dinsmore of New York City purchased the property from Emmet in 1854 and continued to amass adjacent properties, as did his son William B. Dinsmore II, until the total size of the estate exceeded 2,000 acres. The estate was called "The Locusts" owing to the large number of black locust trees on it.

According to family legend, the second generation William B. Dinsmore sent his wife on an extensive trip to Europe in 1871-72, whereupon he employed a veritable army of carpenters and craftsmen to dismantle the old Emmet house and build a three-story Victorian mansion with Italianate influences and a Chinese tower roof. It had ninety-two rooms. Dinsmore had casually mentioned to his wife before her departure that he planned to make a few improvements on the old house. When she returned home in the autumn of 1872 and rounded the brow of the hill on the approach drive to the estate to see the massive Victorian edifice standing in the place of the Gothic villa, she is said to have fainted.

Dinsmore's architectural extravagance was further in evidence in almost ninety structures scattered about the estate, including an extensive barn complex and hothouses. The next owner was Helen Dinsmore Huntington Hull (the former Helen Astor), granddaughter of William B. Dinsmore II. After taking up residence in 1941, she had the mansion razed and replaced by a neo-Baroque villa. This house, designed by John Churchill, stands today under different ownership. The estate, though greatly reduced in size, still boasts magnificent trees and other nineteenth-century plantings.



Steel engraving, 1882