

The Hoyt House (The Point) – Historic Background Summary

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Viewed within the context of the development of the Romantic-inspired villa in American domestic architecture, a period roughly initiated by Town & Davis's design for Glen Ellen, Baltimore, 1833, and culminating in the completion of Olana in 1872, the Hoyt House retains a significant position. The body of work that Vaux contributed to this evolution is considerable. As a protégé of Andrew Jackson Downing, the young Vaux and his fellow Englishman F.C. Withers were charged with carrying on their mentor's work following his untimely death in 1852. During the 1850s, Vaux produced some of the more noteworthy domestic compositions in the Picturesque vein in the United States, among them the Warren and Hoyt houses, and in so doing successfully continued Downing's legacy while evolving his own personal interpretation of Romantic architectural design. This is in addition to the significant work Vaux performed in collaboration with Frederick Law Olmsted in designing Manhattan's Central Park and Brooklyn's Prospect Park, among others. Vaux, along with Jacob Wrey Mous, also designed the original Museum of Natural History and Metropolitan Museum of Art structures, among his other creations located throughout New York State.

Although currently suffering from long deferred maintenance and vandalism, the Hoyt House maintains a considerable presence and many of the salient characteristics that mark it as the work of Calvert Vaux. Its handsomely tooled bluestone walls, having now acquired the luminous but mellow tint and varied texture Vaux desired, remain an impressive monument to the men who dressed and laid them up, and a testament to Vaux's thoughtful planning and considerable comprehension of site specificity. The integration of building with site, a major theme of the Picturesque mantra espoused by Downing and Davis, emerged as a staple of Vaux's work during this period. The form of the Hoyt House, which features four distinctly varying elevations once enlivened by well-rendered detailing, exemplifies Vaux's concern for producing in his architecture a calculated "well-balanced irregularity" such as found in nature. Approaching the house from the primary historic access road, the lively and asymmetrical east elevation first comes into view. As the visitor draws nearer, the primary south-facing façade, the symmetry of which denotes a certain formality appropriate for an entrance, comes fully into view. These views of the Hoyt House from the approach road were obviously not happenstance, but instead were calculated by Vaux for effect. The house's lively and somewhat fanciful Picturesque details, some lost and others removed and placed in storage, were first and foremost functional elements of the house and thereby their ornamental value formed, in the architect's own words, "a balanced extension of the useful and necessary." The overall effect of the exterior, with earth-toned contrasting stone elements and the banded slate roof, continues to provide an informed study in texture, contrast, and polychromy. Vaux's Hoyt House represented, and continues to convey, the essence of the American Picturesque Gothic Revival in its most mature, informed and sophisticated phase.

The house's interior layout, particularly the areas that constitute the primary story, were developed in full consideration of the remarkable emotive potential of The Point's unique and, in the context of the Hudson Valley, all but unparalleled natural scenery. Rooms were laid out on the basis of established view sheds, with the interior space further extended into the out-of-doors by the "terrace" off the north and west elevations and the verandah flanking the brownstone entrance porch on the south elevation. Although the decorative scheme for the primary story was largely reworked in the early twentieth century, the floor plan remains largely intact and the second, basement and attic stories retain their original plans and a majority of their Vaux-period finishes including wood and plaster work. The house was carefully planned to not only acknowledge and celebrate its setting, but to likewise convey the stature and interests of its erectors. It can be viewed as a successful collaboration between architect and client, reflecting, as it does, Vaux's skill as a designer and the personal tastes and needs of Lydig and Geraldine Hoyt. At the same time Vaux's Hoyt House design embodies many of the philosophies articulated in *Villas and Cottages*. Its design and construction provided a venue in which Vaux could showcase his informed conception of upper class American rural life.

Though its established view sheds and manipulated natural features have suffered from natural succession and new growth, the historic Point acreage remains entirely intact and the setting retains the distinctive qualities continue to lend the property its natural charm. View shed corridors could easily be reestablished while other maintenance activities could potentially restore the naturalistic features that Vaux and Hoyt sought to integrate with the villa.

The Hoyt House remains a powerful testament to the development of American domestic architecture and landscape design at the mid-point of the nineteenth century and an important example of the work of a principal figure in the evolution of American Romanticism as expressed in architecture. Stabilization and preservation of this valuable structure will allow this building to claim its rightful place among the magnificent estates and houses in the historic Hudson Valley Region. The loss of the Hoyt House, acknowledged by historians as a seminal design in Vaux's body of commissions, would constitute a significant and costly subtraction from the architectural and cultural history of not only the State of New York, but of the United States.

