

COTTAGE & STABLE, COLLEGE OF MOUNT ST. VINCENT, West 261st Street, Riverdale, The Bronx. Built c.1848-52.

Landmark Site: Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 5958, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land beneath and bounded by the low stone wall that encircles the cottage, the land bounded by a portion of the above mentioned wall and the high stone wall along the western edge of the dirt carriage drive leading from Maple Road to the stable including the land beneath the high stone wall, and the land on which the stable is situated.

On July 12, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Cottage & Stable, College of Mount St. Vincent, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.14). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. No witnesses spoke either in favor of or in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

##### Introduction

The cottage and stable on the campus of the College of Mount St. Vincent, at the northern edge of Riverdale, bordering the Yonkers city line, are mid-nineteenth century picturesque structures which were originally intended as outbuildings for Fonhill, the castle-like estate built in 1848-52 for tragedian Edwin Forrest. At the time of Fonhill's construction, Riverdale was beginning to emerge as a cluster of villas and estates along the Harlem-Hudson railroad line; those buildings which survive from that era, including Fonhill and its cottage and stable, comprise the small group of Hudson River Valley estates within the limits of New York City. Although the identity of the architect of Fonhill and its cottage and stable cannot be determined, there is a definite connection with Alexander Jackson Davis, who corresponded with Forrest about Fonhill and made a sketch of the castle, and who initiated the picturesque cottage tradition of which the Fonhill buildings are a part. The cottage and stable at Mount St. Vincent are among the finest buildings of the picturesque cottage type surviving in New York.

##### Riverdale in 1840-60: Estates and villas in the Hudson River Valley

The area today known as Riverdale, in the northwest corner of the Bronx, did not become part of New York City until 1874, when the western portion of the Bronx became the first district beyond Manhattan Island to be incorporated into the city.<sup>1</sup> Thirty years earlier, Riverdale had been a sparsely settled part of the township of Yonkers in Westchester County primarily comprised of farms that were carved from the enormous Manor of Philipsburg after the Revolution. When Wave Hill, the first known estate in Riverdale, was built for William Lewis Morris in 1843-44, it was almost entirely isolated from other settlements. The proliferation

of villas and estates in the 1850s and 1860s was made possible in 1849 when the Hudson River Railroad was completed as far as Yonkers.<sup>2</sup>

Although two planned communities were proposed for Riverdale in the 1850s, neither flourished, and the area's villas and estates eventually were built singly for individual clients, almost all of whom were prominent New York merchants and financiers. The dozen or so estate houses along the Hudson which still survive were built between 1840 and 1860 in the popular picturesque styles of the day--bracketed Italianate, English Collegiate, Gothic Revival, Anglo-Italianate, etc.--and several were designed by or in association with prominent architects. Wave Hill house (1843-44), Stonehurst (1860-61, built for Robert Colgate), and Greyston (James Renwick, 1863-64, built for William E. Dodge) are designated New York City Landmarks, as are the Riverdale Presbyterian Church (James Renwick, 1863) and Christ Church (Richard Upjohn and Richard M. Upjohn, 1866), also built for the Riverdale estate owners.

#### Edwin Forrest, the first American actor, and Fonthill

The cottage and stable at Mount St. Vincent were originally part of Fonthill, the estate built for actor Edwin Forrest in 1848-52.<sup>3</sup> Fonthill, a designated New York City Landmark, was one of the earliest estates in Riverdale, but not really a part of the villa and estate community: Forrest was an actor, not a financier; the estate was somewhat to the north of the Riverdale cluster, bordering what is today the Yonkers city line; and only four years after its completion the castle and estate were sold to the Sisters of Charity who moved the College of Mount St. Vincent to the site. The castle is, however, one of the major residences of the Hudson River Valley.

Edwin Forrest (1806-72) was one of the most famous American tragedians of the nineteenth century, and, in the words of his nineteenth-century biographer, "the first great original American actor" and the founder of the "American School" of acting.<sup>4</sup> His success was enormous, and he amassed a considerable fortune. Having no heirs (his four children had died in infancy), Forrest resolved to build Fonthill as a home for himself and his wife which after their deaths would serve as a permanently endowed home for retired actors.<sup>5</sup> He chose Riverdale as the site for his home in part because of its splendid scenic position overlooking the Hudson, but also because he surmised that the area would one day be part of New York City and the resulting increase in the value of the land would increase the value of his bequest.<sup>6</sup>

Forrest bought his land in 1847, and the castle was completed in 1852; the cottage and stable were presumably built at the same time, but certainly no later than 1856 when Fonthill was sold. Unfortunately, Forrest and his wife were unable to enjoy their estate for more than a few years because they were divorced shortly afterwards in a particularly drawn-out, acrimonious, expensive, and public proceeding. Forrest sold the estate to the Sisters of Charity, and the castle, cottage and stable have been part of the College of Mount St. Vincent ever since. Forrest's ambition for a home for retired actors was eventually realized in his native city of Philadelphia.<sup>7</sup>

Fonthill and its cottage and stable: Alexander Jackson Davis, Andrew Jackson Downing, and the Picturesque Cottage Tradition

Fonthill was designed as a picturesque castle, inspired by the Gothic Revival Fonthill Abbey in Britain built for William Beckford in 1796. Forrest possessed a copy of John Rutter's Delineations of Fonthill and Its Abbey; he wrote in its flyleaf that Fonthill Abbey was a "make-believe Cathedral, looking like a church turned into a drawing-room by a crazy bishop."<sup>8</sup> Forrest's Fonthill, however, although in the same general mode, bears little resemblance to its British namesake.

The identity of the architect of Fonthill castle and its cottage and stable has never been satisfactorily determined. Several of Forrest's nineteenth-century biographers, who knew him personally, wrote that the design was worked out by Forrest and his wife, and then turned over to Thomas L. Smith, a local builder.<sup>9</sup> Alexander Jackson Davis, one of the country's most important architects at that time, had some connection with the design: he corresponded with Forrest about Fonthill, and made a drawing of it.<sup>10</sup> A likely solution may be that the Forrests worked out the basic scheme with some advice from Davis, and that the work was then carried out by Smith.<sup>11</sup> The cottage and stable might have been designed in the same way. Whatever the combination of ideas, Fonthill is one of the finest buildings of its type, unique in New York City, and the cottage and stable are among the best of the picturesque cottages surviving within the city limits.

The connection of Alexander Jackson Davis with the design of Fonthill and its outbuildings is of interest because it was Davis who initiated the Picturesque Cottage tradition of which the castle and its cottage and stable are a part. That tradition was being promulgated in the 1850s by Andrew Jackson Downing, Davis's friend and colleague, but the first publication of illustrations of the style was Davis's Rural Residences, issued in a small private printing in 1837.<sup>12</sup> Davis's work offered examples of several different building types; among these were a "Villa in the English Collegiate Style," designed for Robert Donaldson's estate Blithewood, and a "Gate-house in the Rustic Cottage Style" for Donaldson's estate.<sup>13</sup> The Villa, an asymmetrical, castellated building with octagonal turrets and one tall octagonal tower, bears a certain resemblance to Fonthill castle; the Gatehouse is the first published version of the "Rustic Cottage Style," and bears a certain resemblance to Fonthill's cottage; it is indeed the prototype of all such cottages.

Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852) became the most influential proponent of the picturesque cottage through his books on the subject, including A Treatise on the Theory and Practise of Landscape Gardening (1841) and Cottage Residences (1842) which briefly discuss the subject, and The Architecture of Country Houses (1850) which contains a much fuller treatment of the topic. In the last work, he divided country houses into three types, cottages, farm-houses, and villas.

What we mean by a cottage, in this country, is a dwelling of small size, intended for the occupation...not by tenants, dependants, or serfs, as in many parts of Europe, but by industrious and intelligent mechanics and working men, the bone and sinew of the land, who own the ground upon which they stand, build them for their own use, and arrange them to satisfy their own peculiar wants and gratify their own tastes.<sup>14</sup>

A cottage should not only...

look like a cottage, but it should avoid all pretension of what it cannot honestly and faithfully be. And as its object is first utility, and then beauty, the useful should never be sacrificed to the ornamental, but the latter should be more obviously connected with, and grow out of the former, in a cottage than in a more elaborate dwelling.<sup>15</sup>

With these definitions established Downing offered models of smaller and larger cottages, most of them board-and-batten, with bracketed roofs and deep eaves, and occasionally ornamental verge-board trim.

The cottage and stable at Fonthill, however, were not intended for an independent mechanic; they were outbuildings for a suburban estate. Downing wrote that the only exceptions to his remarks were "cottages built as gatelodges or gardeners' houses on gentlemen's estates...because in this case, the life and taste of the tenant is not so much indicated as the life and taste of the landlord and proprietor. But even in this case, the highest taste will lead to the rejection of all elaborate ornament in cottages, as not directly truthful and expressive."<sup>16</sup> This kind of cottage or gatehouse can still be found in various parts of Riverdale: the Spaulding estate has a fine cottage designed by Charles Clinton, a prominent New York architect, in 1880; the Dodge estate has a handsome and elaborate gatehouse; and Stonehurst has a stable designed in the same 1850s Italianate style as the house itself.<sup>17</sup> Fonhill's cottage and stable, therefore, although firmly within the picturesque cottage style, are somewhat more elaborate than they might otherwise have been.

The cottage and stable at Fonhill combine elements of the Gothic and Italianate modes in a typically picturesque manner. The cottage is a small, two-story building, not unlike Downing's "Design V: Workingman's Model Cottage," which it resembled even more before its twin chimneys were removed. Certain elements, however, are different: the verge-board and brackets of the roof are similar to those of "Design XXIX: Rural Gothic Villa," while the jerkinhead gables are like those of "Design XVI: Bracketed Farm House of Wood." The material of the cottage is not the traditional cottage board-and-batten, but rather the same beautifully-cut locally quarried fieldstone as Fonhill castle. The cottage's main Gothic-arched entrance, located in a slightly projecting central bay, includes typically Gothic diamond-paned transom and sidelights and is



topped by a simple pedimented stone lintel that is flush with the facade. The straightforward fenestration consists of plain stone lintels and Gothic diamond-shaped panes of leaded glass. Perhaps the most striking feature on the cottage is the half-hipped roof with deep eaves projecting out over exceptionally handsome carved wooden brackets in the Italianate manner. Over the central bay this roof breaks into a jerkin-headed gable adorned with unusually-shaped vergeboard. The additional structures added at the rear of the cottage are not part of the original structure.

The stable at Fonhill is a much more elaborate creation than any of the quite modest stables outlined in Downing's book, and its prototype must have been something like his "Design XX: Villa Farm House," a rambling building with peaked-roof gables of various sizes. The stable is constructed of the same fieldstone as the cottage. The large and small gables of its second story create a picturesque roofline which is among its most striking features. The roof thus defined is carried on brackets which are sturdier and more massive than those on the cottage. Diamond-shaped attic windows on both the east and west fronts contrast with conventional square-headed fenestration, while an unusual segmentally-arched triple window is a prominent feature of the structure's rear central bay. The two garage door openings on the west front, formerly used for horses and carriages, appear to have been enlarged to accommodate automobiles, but the building is otherwise intact.

### Conclusion

The cottage and stable at Mount St. Vincent, originally outbuildings of Edwin Forrest's Fonhill estate, are an integral part of the small group of Hudson River Valley estates surviving within the city limits of New York, and, with Fonhill castle, the physical legacy to New York City of America's first successful professional actor. As examples of the picturesque cottage type, they are among the few such buildings surviving in New York City, the only known ones to be associated with Alexander Jackson Davis, initiator of the tradition, and two of the finest such buildings within the city limits.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. What is now The Bronx was until 1874 a series of townships making up the southern end of Westchester County. All the present Bronx west of the Bronx River was annexed to New York City in 1874; known variously as the "Annexed District," "Uptown," or "Northside," the area was part of New York County. In 1895, the remainder of the Bronx, east of the Bronx River, was also annexed. In 1898, the City of Greater New York was formed with the annexation of Brooklyn (Kings County), Queens (Queens County), and Staten Island (Richmond County); the Bronx became officially the Borough of the Bronx, but remained part of New York County until the creation of Bronx County in 1914.
2. A general early history of Riverdale can be found in Ellen DeNooyer and Regina Kellerman, "The History of Wave Hill," unpublished manuscript, November, 1978, prepared for Wave Hill, Riverdale, The Bronx.
3. They are described as such in A Descriptive and Historical Sketch of the Academy of Mount St. Vincent on-the-Hudson, New York City, 1847-1884 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1884), p.9: "...passing on the right a picturesque stone cottage and large stone stables and barn, built by Mr. Forrest, the celebrated actor..."
4. William Rounseville Alger, Life of Edwin Forrest, The American Tragedian (originally published in Philadelphia, 1877; reprinted New York: Arno Press, 1977), p.4.
5. In the cornerstone of Fonhill Forrest placed a document explaining his purposes:

In building this house, I am impelled by no vain desire to occupy a grand mansion for the gratification of self-love; but my object is to build a desirable, spacious, and comfortable abode for myself and my wife, to serve us during our natural lives, and at our death to endow the building with a sufficient yearly income, so that a certain number of decayed or superannuated actors and actresses of American birth (all foreigners to be strictly excluded) may inhabit the mansion and enjoy the grounds thereunto belonging, so long as they live; and at the death of any one of the actors or actresses inhabiting the premises, his or her place to be supplied by another from the theatrical profession, who, from age or infirmity, may be found unable to obtain a livelihood upon the stage. The rules and regulations by which this institution is to be governed will, at some future day, be framed by  
EDWIN FORREST.

Quoted in Alger, p.484.

6. Ibid., 484.
7. Other accounts of Forrest and Fonthill may be found in Laurence Barrett, Edwin Forrest (originally published 1881; reprinted New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969; Montrose J. Moses, The Fabulous Forrest: The Record of an American Actor (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1929), and most recently Richard Moody, Edwin Forrest, First Star of the American Stage (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960).
8. Moody, pp.242-243.
9. Barrett, op.cit., p.76, wrote in 1881 that "The plans were formed by Mrs. Forrest and approved by him /Forrest/."
10. The drawing is now in the Alexander Jackson Davis collection in the archive of Avery Library, Columbia University.
11. For more on the subject see Donald M. Reynolds, Fonthill Castle: Paradigm of Hudson-River Gothic (Riverdale, New York: College of Mount Saint Vincent-on-Hudson, 1976).
12. Alexander Jackson Davis, Rural Residences (originally published New York, 1838, reprint New York: Da Capo, 1980).
13. According to Davis, it was to Donaldson's "taste and aide, in selecting designs, /that/ the public are mainly indebted for the present publication." Ibid., n.p.
14. Andrew Jackson Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses (originally published New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1850; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), p.40.
15. Ibid., p.44.
16. Ibid., pp.42-43.
17. All three of the above named are still extant.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Cottage & Stable, College of Mount St. Vincent, has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among their important qualities, the Cottage and Stable, College of Mount St. Vincent are an integral part of the small group of Hudson River Valley estates surviving within the city limits, in Riverdale; that they were constructed as outbuildings for Fonthill, the important castle-like estate built for Edwin Forrest, America's first professional actor, and are part of his physical legacy to New York City; that their design is exemplary of the picturesque cottage tradition initiated by Alexander Jackson Davis, who was connected with the design of Fonthill; that their design combines elements of the Gothic Revival and Italianate styles in a typically picturesque manner; and that the Cottage and Stable are among the finest buildings in the picturesque cottage tradition surviving in New York City.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Cottage & Stable, College of Mount St. Vincent, West 261st Street, Riverdale, Borough of The Bronx and designates Tax Map Block 5958, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land beneath and bounded by the low stone wall that encircles the cottage, the land bounded by a portion of the above mentioned wall and the high stone wall along the western edge of the dirt carriage drive leading from Maple Road to the stable including the land beneath the high stone wall, and the land on which the stable is situated, Borough of The Bronx, as its Landmark Site.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Pierson, William. American Buildings and Their Architects: Technology and the Picturesque, The Corporate and the Early Gothic Styles. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978.
- Reynolds, Donald M. Fonthill Castle: Paradigm of Hudson-River Gothic. Riverdale, N.Y.: College of Mount St. Vincent-on-Hudson, 1976.

DESIGN V  
WORKINGMAN'S MODEL COTTAGE

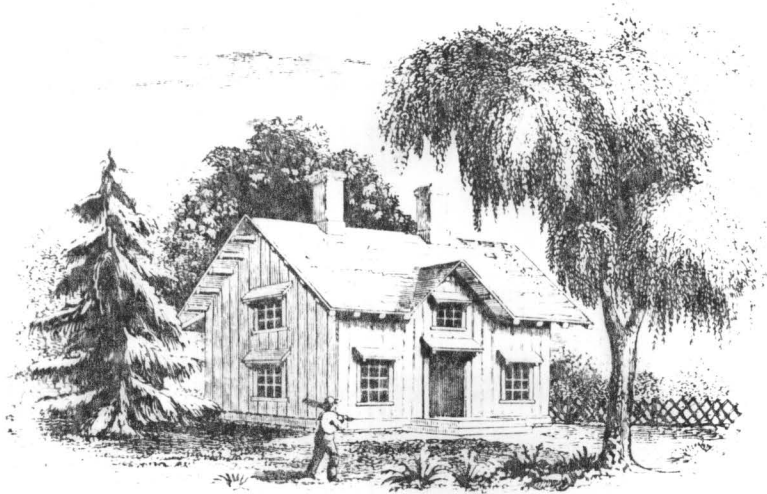


Fig. 22

DESIGN XX  
VILLA FARM HOUSE

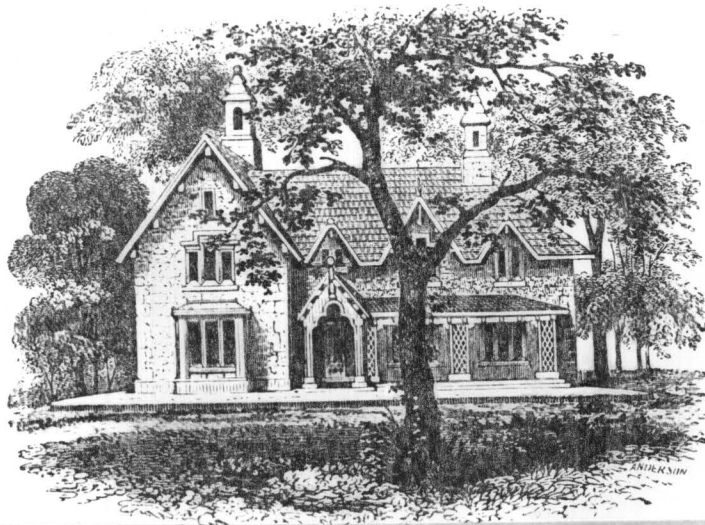


Fig. 76

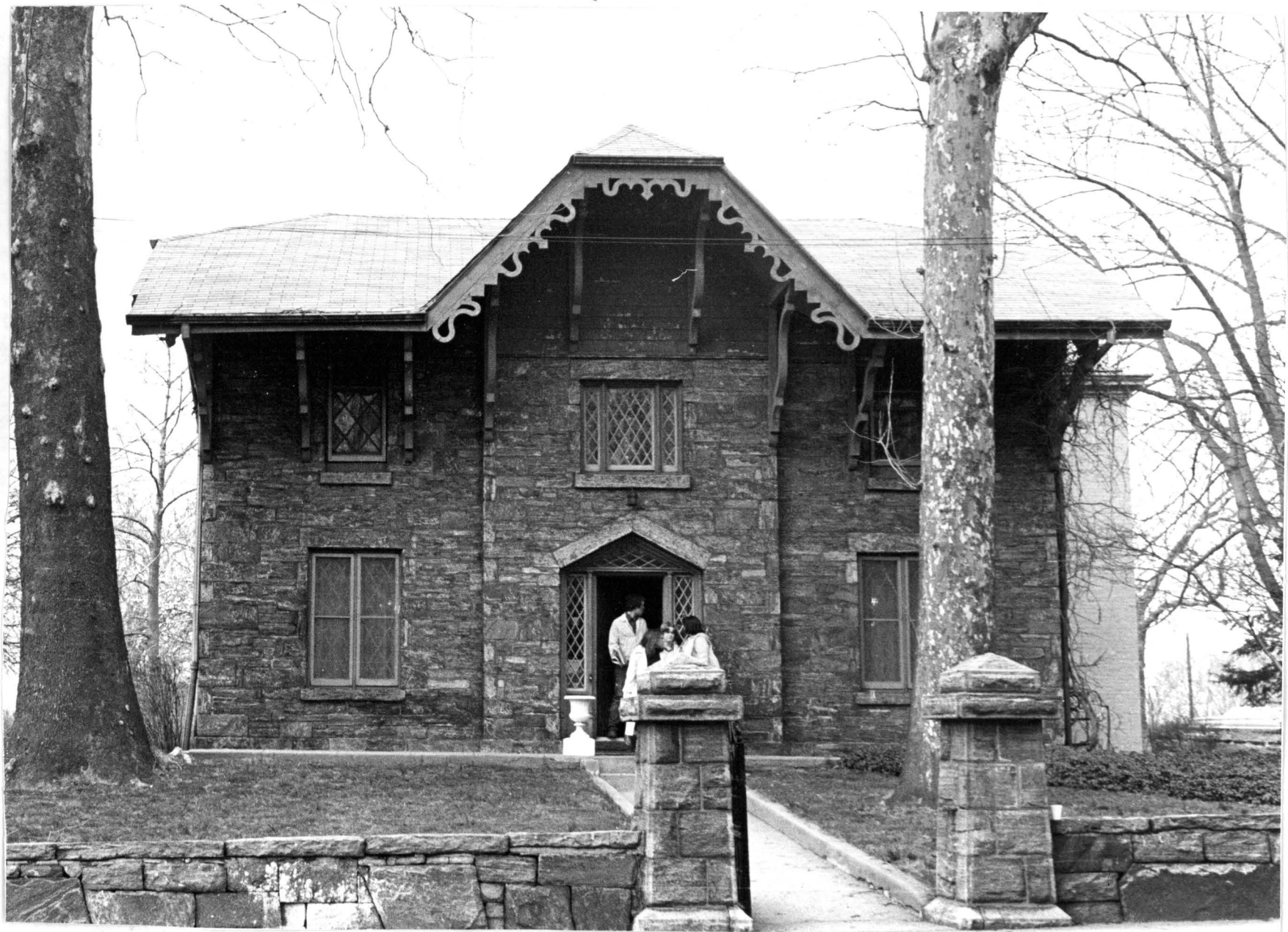
Designs V and XX from Andrew Jackson Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses (from reprinted version, New York: Dover Publications, 1969). Compare Design V with Cottage, and Design XX with Stable, College of Mount St. Vincent.



Stable at Mount St. Vincent  
Riverdale, The Bronx

Built: 1848-52

Photo Credit: Landmarks  
Preservation Commission



Cottage at Mount St. Vincent  
Riverdale, The Bronx

Built: 1848-52

Photo Credit: Landmarks  
Preservation Commission