

# Comprehensive Plan for the Town of Shandaken, NY

As approved by

**Shandaken Town Board**  
**July 11, 2005**

As recommended by

**Shandaken Comprehensive Plan Committee**  
**May 11, 2005**

Prepared by

**Stantec Consulting Services Inc.**  
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## **Vision Statement**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

New York State Town Law (§272-a) authorizes preparation of a master (or comprehensive) plan by a town and sets forth the procedures to be followed. The law includes a statement of "legislative findings and intent" that emphasizes the importance of the planning process to the health, safety, and general welfare of town residents and the essential need for open citizen participation in the design of the comprehensive plan.

The law goes on to define the comprehensive plan as follows:

*"Town Comprehensive Plan" means the materials, written and/or graphic, including but not limited to maps, charts, studies, resolutions, reports, and other descriptive material that identify the goals, objectives, principles, guidelines, policies, standards, devices, and instruments for the immediate and long-range protection, enhancement, growth and development of the town located outside the limits of any incorporated village or city."*

This plan for the Town of Shandaken recognizes that future actions in the town are dependent on a variety of factors and interrelated decisions by both government agencies and private property owners, including many that cannot be predicted in advance. Therefore, the plan is designed as a policy document that sets forth goals and objectives for the town's future, which can be used to evaluate future proposals for actions by public and private entities. The plan will serve as a guide for decision makers and a statement of the town's policies for its future.

Most rural communities, like the Town of Shandaken, were originally established without comprehensive plans, review boards, or regulatory controls. The historic hamlets and natural features, which shaped growth and rural roads, remain from the era of initial development and combine to create a picturesque environment that has formed the basis for a long-standing tourist-based economy.

By carefully examining current conditions and issues in the context of citizen involvement, a community can prepare a comprehensive plan to guide its future. The plan should establish community goals and include recommendations intended to preserve the environment, while supporting growth that is compatible with community standards.

The Town of Shandaken does not have a comprehensive plan. However, the town has enacted land use regulations to guide development, including the subdivision regulations approved in 1971, the town's first Zoning Law enacted in 1976 and substantially revised and amended in 1987. This law delineates eight zoning districts and provides standards for development in each district.

In 1999 and 2004, the Town Board applied for and received grants from the New York State Department of State and the New York State Department of Transportation to prepare its first Master Plan. The Board appointed a Comprehensive Plan Committee to prepare a plan for recommendation to the Town Board. Under New York State Law, such a plan can only be adopted by the Town Board.

In the course of preparing this plan, two critical sets of resources have been used:

**Previous Reports:** Among those reports, which have been referenced during this process, are:

- "Resource Protection and Economic Development Strategy for the Route 28 Corridor," Route 28 Corridor Committee, 1994;

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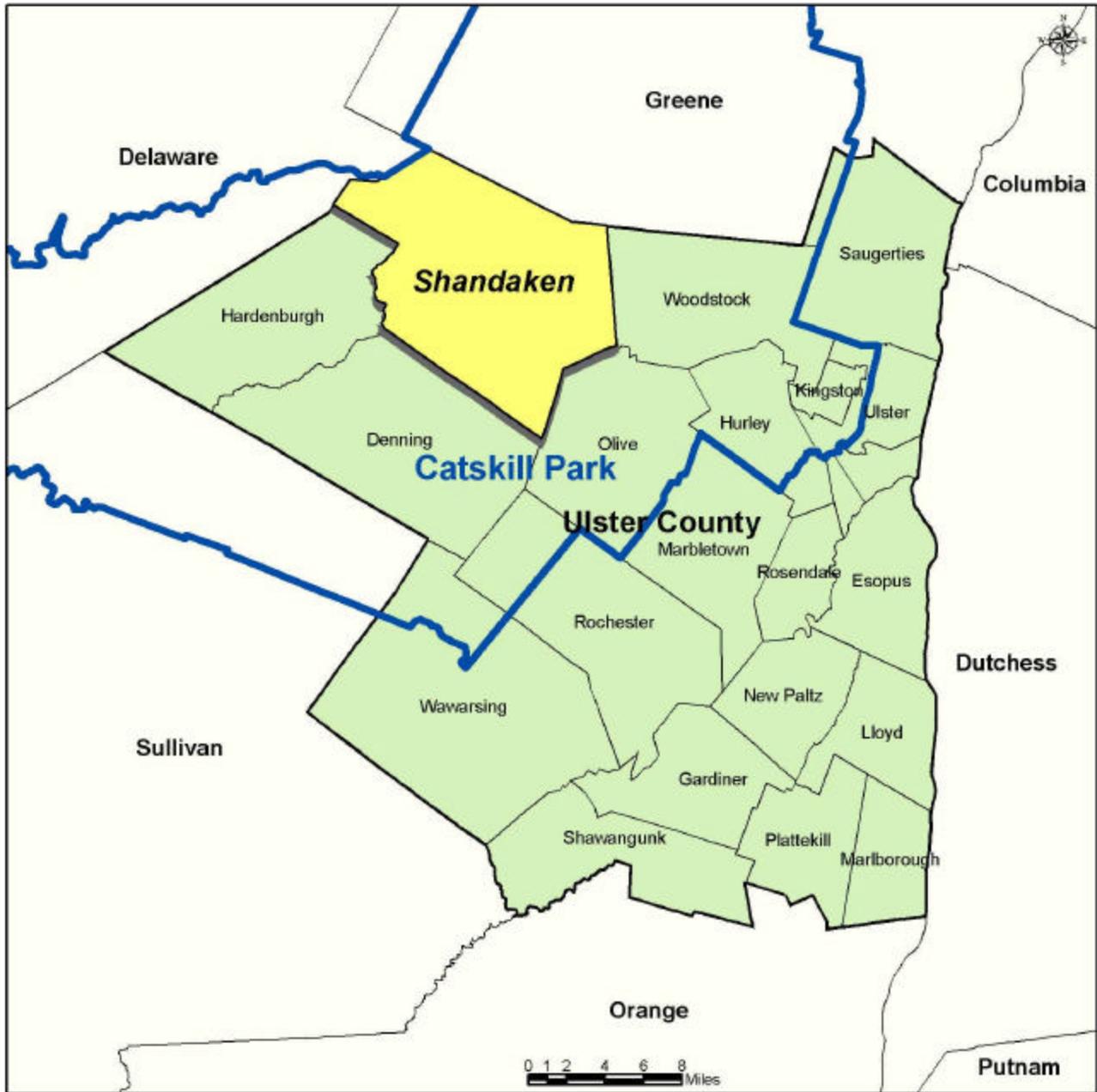
- "Tourism Development Plan for the Central Catskills," Central Catskills Planning Alliance, 1998;
- "Catskill Forest Preserve Public Access Plan," NYSDEC, 1999;
- "West of Hudson Economic Development Study for the Catskill Watershed Corporation", July 26, 1999;
- "Shandaken Wild Forest Draft Unit Management Plan," NYSDOT, June 2003;
- "Ulster County Transportation Plan," April 2003;
- "Ulster County Land Use Plan;"
- 2002 "Draft Proposed Comprehensive Plan;"
- 2001 "Draft Proposed Comprehensive Plan."

**Public Involvement:** This has been an integral part of the development of this plan. Opportunities for public comment have been created since the initial step of the plan development, starting in 2000. The various forms of public involvement are listed as follows:

- **Questionnaire:** In June 2000, the Shandaken Master Plan Committee conducted a town-wide survey. Over 3,000 surveys were mailed to property owners and registered voters; 759 households responded, resulting in a return of approximately 25 percent. Shuster Associates, Inc., the Town Planning Consultant, and a qualified volunteer, tabulated the survey results. The results of the survey are reflected in this plan and included in the Appendix as it was introduced in the original 2001 Draft Plan.
- **Community Workshops:** In November 2000, two community workshops were held at the Town Hall and were facilitated by Helen Budrock of the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development. The workshops were conducted to encourage an informal interactive process to allow residents to share opinions and develop goals for the town's future. Over 100 people participated and, at the conclusion of each workshop, voted on the most important goals for the town over the next 10 years. A summary of the workshop results are reflected in this plan and included in the Appendix as it was introduced in the original 2001 Draft Plan.
- **Public Meetings:** Throughout the development of past and current plans, several public meetings were held to provide a forum for comment on the draft plans as follows:
  - Public Hearing – December 2001 – Town Hall
  - Public Hearing – January 27, 2003 – Belleayre Ski Center
  - Public Information Meeting – October 6, 2004 – Town Hall
  - Public Hearing – April 6, 2005 – Phoenicia Elementary School
- **Public Comprehensive Plan Committee Meetings:**
  - 2002 Plan Committee Meetings – Thirteen meetings were held from May through December.
  - 2004 Plan Committee Meetings – Six meetings were held at the Town Hall and open to the public. Video tape recordings of these meetings are available and were aired on the local public service television station.
  - 2005 Plan Committee Meetings – Ten meetings were held from August 2004 through May 2005. All were open to the public and video tape recordings are available.

This plan will take us through Shandaken's History, the town's current conditions and opportunities, the town's needs for the future, and goals and future actions to ultimately achieve the vision for our community. Figure 1 illustrates the Town of Shandaken in a regional context.

Figure 1 – Town Location



## **I. SHANDAKEN HISTORY**

### **A. Natural Setting**

The Town of Shandaken resides in the heart of the Catskill Mountains, which are located approximately 100 miles northwest of New York City. Encompassing four counties and over 6,000 square miles of mountains, forests, rivers, and farmland, the Catskills are often referred to as America's First Wilderness because scholars trace the beginnings of the environmental conservation movement to this beautiful area. With almost three dozen mountain peaks over 3,500 feet in elevation and six major river systems, the Catskills are an ecological resource of significant importance.

Pure air and water, rich farmland, parks and forests, clear-flowing streams, cascading waterfalls, grand panoramic views and historic villages characterize the Catskills. Long renowned as a prime vacation destination, the Catskills offer a variety of recreational opportunities including hiking, skiing, camping, biking, rock and ice climbing, canoeing, kayaking and inner-tubing, fishing, hunting, bird-watching, or just plain rubber-necking.



The Central Catskill region spans a natural system of valleys, which traverse the mountains following the upper reaches of the Esopus Creek and the East Branch of the Delaware River. The Town of Shandaken consists of approximately 79,200 acres and 110.82 miles of highways. The town has distinctive characteristics and historical significance surrounding its unique twelve hamlets of Woodland Valley, Oliverea, Chichester, Bushnellsville, Mt. Pleasant, Mt. Tremper, Phoenicia, Shandaken, Allaben, Big Indian, Pine Hill and Highmount.

Generally, the mountains consist of steep wooded slopes, and in some locations, show a terrace pattern, reflective of weathering difference in the conglomerate, sandstone, and shale beds that underlie the Catskills. Steep mountain runs convey water from the shallow hillside soils into larger creeks such as the Esopus that can change in character from a quiet flowing stream to a raging torrent with an afternoon thunderstorm.

### **B. Early History**

The valleys of the Central Catskills made natural travel routes for both Indians and colonial Europeans. This access, both to the Catskills area and beyond, has had a profound effect upon the region's history. During pre-European times, much of the Central Catskills were inhabited by the Minsi subgroup of the Lenni-Lenape people, who were also referred to as the "Delaware" people by the British. One major Minsi settlement, a "principal fire" known as Pakatakan, existed near present-day Margaretville just west of Shandaken. By the time Dutch settlers from Hurley explored new lands near the Pakatakan settlement in 1762, out-migration and the introduction of European diseases had decimated the Minsi population.



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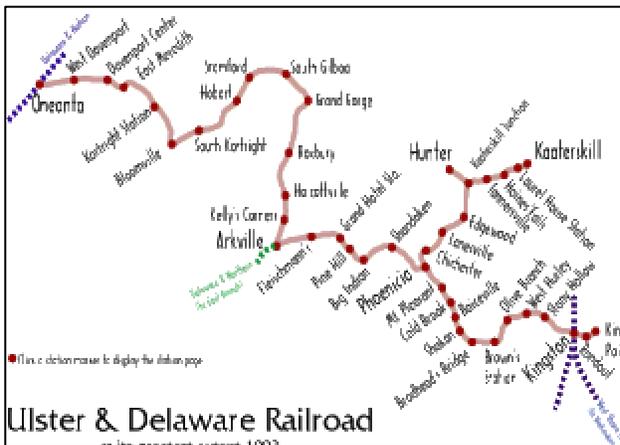
During the colonial era, the Central Catskills were part of the Hardenbergh Patent, in which ownership was mostly in the hands of the Livingston family by the Revolutionary War. The Town of Shandaken was part of Woodstock until 1804. Yankees fleeing the stony soils of Connecticut joined immigrants from other states and foreign shores in exploring the region west of the Hudson in the hopes of locating arable farmland. Settlers in the valleys of the Central Catskills soon learned to use the natural resources of the mountains to supplement their attempts at farming, and small sawmills and tanneries sprouted across the landscape. The military demand for leather goods during the War of 1812 spurred the development of large-scale industrial tanneries, which not only decimated the small handicrafters, but also much of the extensive hemlock forests in the Catskills.

In the 19th Century, tanning and other industries of the Central Catskills became profitable due to transportation improvements and innovations. The Hudson River was opened up to competition amongst steamboats, resulting in shorter travel times between New York City and river ports, such as Rondout (now part of Kingston) and the Catskills. Turnpikes were chartered and constructed to provide access to resource-rich hinterlands.



Horse-drawn wagons full of lumber, furniture, hides or bluestone, another developing industry, shared the turnpike with stage coaches that brought mail and visitors to the region, including sportsmen to hunt and fish from the natural bounty of wildlife that was present. Many settlers along the turnpike route had rooms for rent in their homes, or built boarding houses, in order to provide lodging for the team drivers, as a trip in a fully-loaded wagon between Shandaken hamlet and Kingston took three days.

Construction of the Rondout & Oswego Railroad (later the Ulster & Delaware) provided a new, more efficient means of transportation for both freight and passenger traffic. The R & O reached Shandaken hamlet in 1870. Following its reorganization as the Ulster & Delaware Railroad in 1875, it began to promote the Central Catskills as a tourist destination. A great wave of resort hotel construction followed until the turn of the century. Pine Hill was one of the focal points, with 20 such facilities, including the Grand Hotel built on the Delaware County Line.



The 418-room Grand Hotel (1881-1966) Highmount, N.Y., opened in 1881 by the Ulster & Delaware Railroad, sat on the side of Monka Hill, with a commanding view down the Big Indian Valley towards Slide Mountain. The hotel was a copy of the famous Oriental Hotel on Coney Island in New York City. Because of its affiliation with the railroad, it remained in operation until 1966, long after the other great hotels of its era had closed.

The natural beauty and resources of the Central Catskills, including and surrounding Shandaken, influenced two major movements with effects far beyond the Catskills. An unknown painter named Thomas Cole first visited the Catskills in 1825. He soon was creating landscape paintings, which were tremendously popular and produced numerous followers, known as the Hudson River School. The paintings also helped to promote interest in the Catskill Mountains and the development of resorts and retreats from which their beauty could be appreciated. In the second half of the 19th century, John Burroughs, a native of nearby Roxbury in Delaware County, raised the public consciousness about the value and beauty of the natural environment. His writings were based on his experiences in the Catskills and formed the genesis of the environmental movement, which continues to this day.



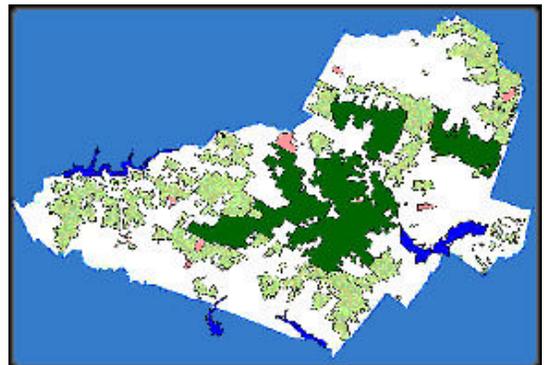
Following the turn of the century and more so after World War I, the demographics, which had supported the hotel industry, had changed. The automobile and the modern highway system curtailed demand on passenger railroads. The Ulster & Delaware Railroad's passenger traffic peaked at 676,000 in 1913 and declined afterwards. Ski trains were run to Simpson's Slope, which opened in 1935 in Phoenicia for a time, but passenger service was discontinued in 1955. Air-conditioning and convenient air travel further reduced the number of people who had been coming to the Catskills for vacations and to beat the summer heat of the city. However, winter visitors somewhat offset those declining numbers. The ski industry in the Catskills developed in response to growing demand for year-round outdoor recreational opportunities. Highmount Ski area was started in 1946, and in 1949, New York State built Belleayre Ski Center. Hunting and fishing, which had suffered due to environmental degradation by the tanneries and quarries, were on the rebound.

### **C. Major Events**

Several major events have shaped the Central Catskills and the Town of Shandaken over the past century.

#### **1. Catskill Forest Preserve**

The justification for creating the Forest Preserve was to protect water resources and open space, and to provide opportunity for recreational uses (Catskill Forest Preserve Public Access Plan, 1999). The first trail was built in 1892 to the summit of Slide Mountain, the highest peak in the Catskills at 4,180 feet.

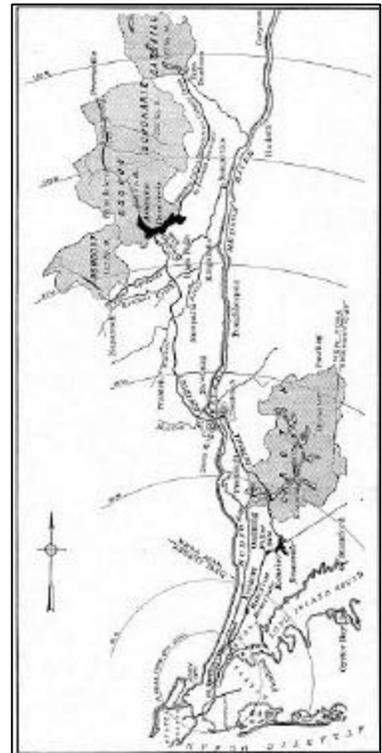


The Catskill Park was established by the New York State Legislature in 1904 and encompasses an area of Delaware, Greene, Sullivan, and Ulster counties in which state-owned or acquired lands were classified as forever-wild Forest Preserve. The Catskill Park is a checkerboard of public and privately owned lands. While the percentages change when the state acquires new land, the ratio of private-to-public is about two to one. The state owns over one-third of the land within the park boundaries, and the balance is privately owned. These state-owned lands within the "blue line" boundary of the Catskill Park are designated as the Catskill Forest Preserve, and the New York State Constitution requires that these lands be **"forever kept as wild forest"**.

Over the century, since it was first established, the Catskill Forest Preserve has grown from its original 33,894 acres to its current total of almost 300,000 acres and now constitutes over 40% of the total area of the Catskill Park. The Forest Preserve encompasses the highest mountains in the Catskills, including many of the 35 peaks over 3,500 feet in elevation. The State of New York continues to acquire land within the Catskill Park to add to its Forest Preserve holdings, with the goal of preserving lands of critical ecological importance to the Catskill Mountain region. Today, there are over 700,000 acres of parkland contained in Catskill Park.

## 2. New York City Watershed

Pressure to satisfy the needs of New York City for a safe and sufficient water supply increased after the droughts in 1895 and 1896. Various alternatives to provide new water supply sources were investigated over the next 10 years, culminating in 1905 when the New York State Legislature approved creation of the New York City Board of Water Supply with powers to establish reservoirs and regulate the watershed in the Catskill Mountains. The 1909 plan for the construction of the world's greatest aqueduct system is shown to the right. This system now includes six reservoirs and a regulated watershed of over 1,600 square miles. In response to new federal standards for public water supplies, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) issued new draft watershed regulations in September 1990. The 35 communities in the Catskill watershed organized the Coalition of Watershed Towns to respond to the regulations which they believed would have major impacts on the economy of the region. After long negotiations in 1997, an agreement was reached on a Watershed Protection Plan to maintain and enhance the quality of the city's drinking water supply, while protecting the economic vitality and social character of watershed communities.



**3. Belleayre Ski Center**

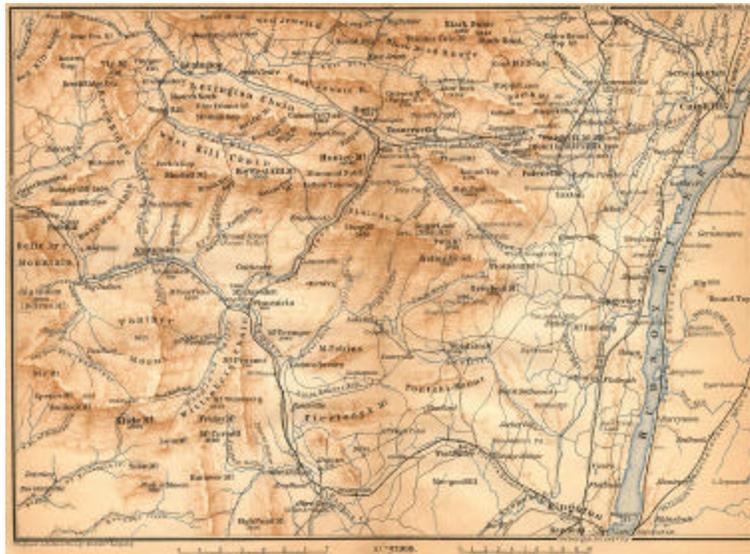
Creation of the Catskill Park was followed by acquisition of land, much of it on sensitive and remote mountaintops, to preserve it as "forever wild." In November 1947, the people of New York voted and approved the creation of Belleayre Ski Center by amending the New York State Constitution to allow for construction of a ski center on Belleayre Mountain in Ulster County. In 1949, New York State began construction of the Belleayre Ski Center in Highmount.



Operated by NYSDEC, the Belleayre Ski Center and the Pine Hill Lake Day Use Area now comprise one of the major tourist destinations in the region, which accommodated 175,000 skiers in 2002, approximately 165,000 skiers in 2003 and generates patrons for many of the region's tourism-based businesses. Recent investments to improve physical facilities and marketing at Belleayre has demonstrated the state's long-term commitment to maintaining this major resource. Over the past 50 years, numerous proposals have been put forth for the ski center's expansion. Every ten years, Belleayre Ski Center is required to draft a new Unit Management Plan that identifies future development and capital improvement projects. In addition, in keeping with the Catskill State Park Master Plan, future construction and/or expansion of facilities on State-owned land must be considered in the context of the Unit Management Plan, the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) and the public hearing process.

**4. Realignment of Route 28**

Route 28 was always the main artery through the valley, running through virtually every hamlet. In the 1960's, Route 28 was rebuilt and realigned to bypass many of the hamlets. This new alignment allowed automobile traffic to travel through the heart of the Catskills more quickly, but also effected auto-dependent businesses on the hamlet main streets and encouraged new business activity along the new route. More recently, revitalization efforts in the larger hamlets, particularly Phoenicia and Pine Hill, have benefited to some extent by the absence of through traffic.



*1903 Map of the Catskill Region*