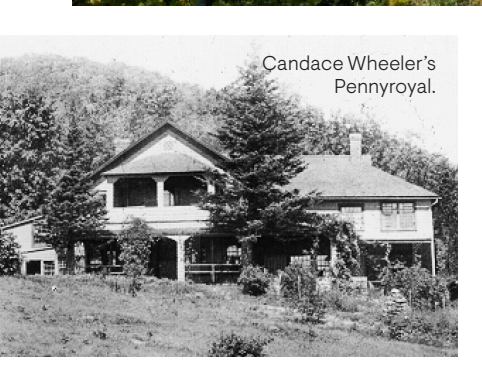
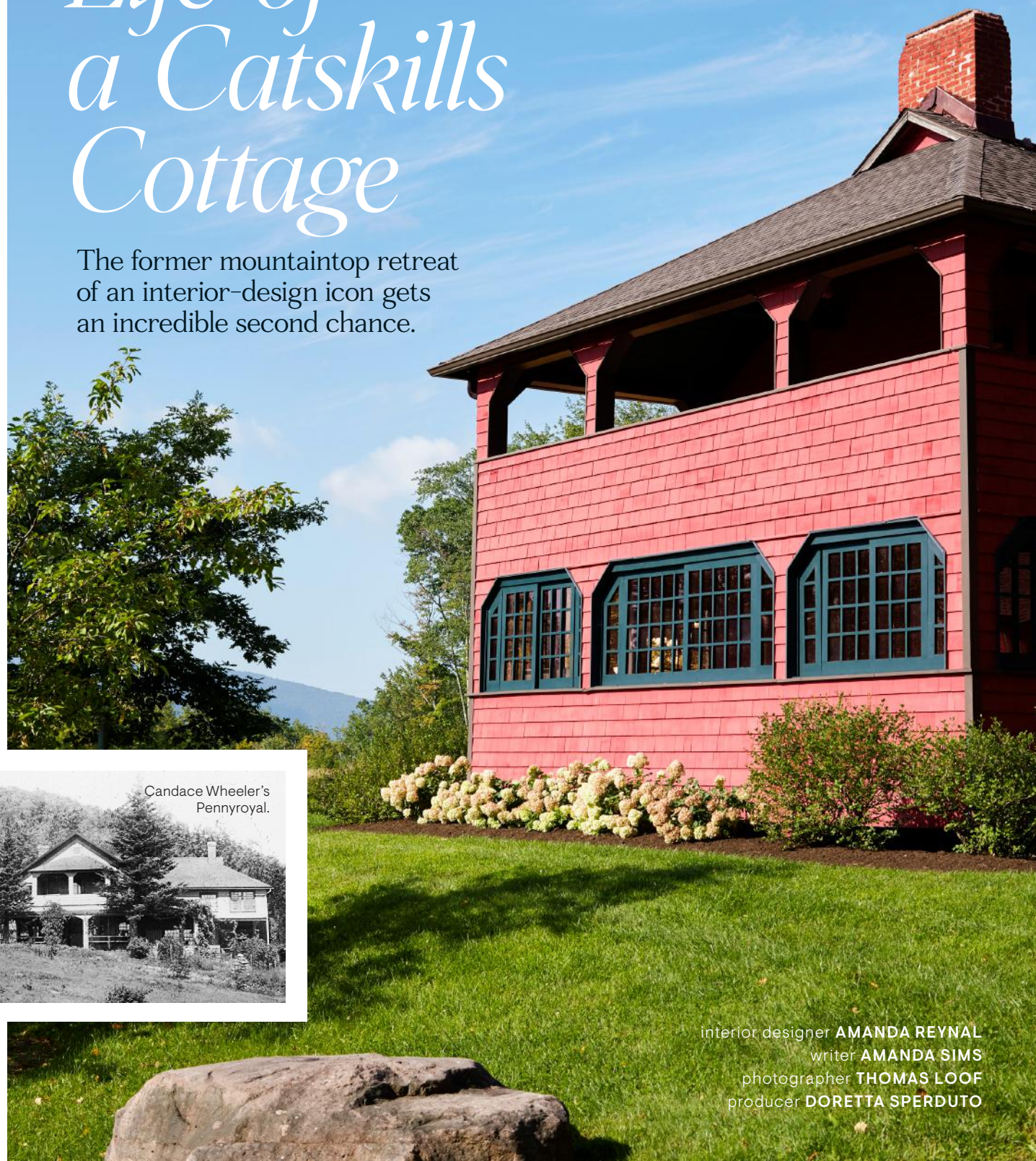


The Secret Life of a Catskills Cottage

The former mountaintop retreat of an interior-design icon gets an incredible second chance.



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 writer **AMANDA SIMS**
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PHOTOGRAPHER COURTESY OF ONTEORA CLUB (INSET)

"She made it socially and professionally acceptable for women to be interior designers."



"It's everyone's favorite place to be," says designer Amanda Reynal of the covered front porch (one of three at Pennyroyal). Cushions on Summer Classics wicker chairs are upholstered in Quadrille's Ferns on Suncloth, an indoor-outdoor fabric. Ceiling paint, custom color by Benjamin Moore. *Opposite:* Reynal stained the shingles a "deep Nantucket red" after realizing the original house was that color.



IT WAS A SPRING DAY IN THE CATSKILLS, and Candace Thurber Wheeler was looking for a mountaintop. She'd grown up nearby and, after a career in the decorative arts in New York City, she wanted to build a vacation home. There were stipulations, though: The plot had to have a great view and robust natural surroundings. According to her biography, it had to be a place "where we could build a camp or cabin, and live a wild life for a few summer weeks."

Her brother bought 108 acres that day, and Wheeler was able to design and build her dream house, Pennyroyal. It was named both for a local flower and the home's thrifty-



but-pretty construction. The year was 1883.

Those first summers were blissful, but eventually, Wheeler itched for company. At her and her sister-in-law's behest, the acreage surrounding Pennyroyal was soon developed into an artist's colony, Onteora, where the likes of Mark Twain would take up occasional residence (a lack of heat made it somewhat unreasonable for year-round sojourns).

Wheeler was by now a veteran of firsts. In 1877, she'd founded the Society of Decorative Art in New York and the New York Exchange for Woman's Work, where single women could learn crafts like sewing and needlepoint to make a living (the latter stayed open in Manhattan until 2003). Then came an interior design firm, Tiffany & Wheeler, and her own textile house, Associated Artists, where she trained other female designers. She even got into writing, publishing *The Art of Stitchery* in this very magazine, circa 1899. None of this was lost to history—**Wheeler is now known as the "mother of interior design."**

All this she accomplished without formal training, starting at around age 50.

"She was really a visionary in her time, especially in the way she championed women," says Iowa-based designer Amanda Reynal, who bought Pennyroyal to use, like Wheeler did, as a vacation home. "She made it socially and professionally acceptable for women to be interior designers."

Above: Certain pieces, like the hand-painted dining room hutch, came with the house. Carson chairs, [Serena & Lily](#). Zag rug, [Michaelian Home](#). Left: The living room, part of Candace Wheeler's original construction, has a frieze that she painted onto the wall. Reynal used its colors to design the room. Opposite: Four shades of [Benjamin Moore](#) blue—Blue Bayou, Blue Dragon, Blueberry Hill, and Sea View—were used to paint a striped pattern on the kitchen floor. Ceiling fixtures, [Rejuvenation](#). Bar stools, [Serena & Lily](#).



Some of the hand-painted floors are original to the house, but Reynal added these stripes for fun.



As it now stands, Pennyroyal looks quite a lot like Wheeler’s original Arts & Crafts cottage. Reynal and her husband built out a basement to add a furnace, razed a few rooms for modern updates (they rebuilt them in the same footprint), and, of course, decorated. “I tried to find as much as I could that would be Candace Wheeler–approved,” says the designer, who founded her own firm in 2001. Mixed in with some Wheeler originals are antiques and even vintage-inspired new pieces from Serena & Lily and Rejuvenation. Hand-blocked fabrics and hooked rugs nod to the crafts Wheeler taught local women (“there was activity all the time,” Reynal says).

“We’re very lucky, really, that our industry has come full circle, and we have so many small fabric houses and vendors who do custom color,” says Reynal. Many thanks, of course, to Wheeler’s precedents.

For all the tradition, the Reynals treat Pennyroyal like a summer camp. (Cue the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack.) They take up residence for weeks at a time, hiking, canoeing, and playing tennis. Days start with coffee and end with a cocktail party on one of the home’s three covered porches. “We treat them like outdoor rooms,” Reynal says. Channeling Wheeler’s wishes for a place to “live a wild life” every summer, she calls theirs “kind of a barefoot, top-of-the-mountain lifestyle.” ■

Right: A pastel of Mark Twain—a repeat visitor to Onteora—was drawn directly onto the original pink plaster wall by Wheeler’s daughter, Dora; the frame and matting are permanently attached to the wall to preserve it. Below: **L.L. Bean** Adirondack chairs outside the garden shed. Opposite: For the boys’ room, a custom canoe sign nods to the countless hours they’ve spent paddling around nearby Onteora Lake. Beds, **Crate & Kids**. Star micro-hooked wool rug, **Dash & Albert**. Poster, vintage. For more details, see *Resources*.



“There was activity all the time—they painted china and wove rugs from scraps of fabric.”

The Extraordinary History of Pennyroyal

After 136 years, Candace Thurber Wheeler’s mountaintop home is still standing proud.



1887

The founding of Onteora, an artist’s colony comprising hundreds of acres surrounding, and including, Pennyroyal. Mark Twain makes repeat visits.

1977

Francis Lee Thurber (likely Wheeler’s nephew) renovates the kitchen and baths of Pennyroyal, then sells it to the Reynal family.

2016

A second remodeling requires rebuilding many rooms to suit a modern family. Wheeler’s library and living room, featuring original frescoes, are spared.

1883

Frank Wheeler purchases a 108-acre farm in Tannersville, New York. His sister Candace designs a summer cottage and, when it’s built, calls it Pennyroyal.

1895

Onteora Club is incorporated. Plumbing is installed to appeal to newer residents. Wheeler disapproves, but that doesn’t keep her from visiting with her daughter, Dora.



2005

Amanda Reynal and her husband purchase the house from his parents, installing its first basement and central heating system.

PHOTOGRAPHERS THIS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES (MARK TWAIN); GROSS & DALEY PHOTOGRAPHY (HOUSE EXTERIOR)

