

HISTORIAN'S CORNER

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"Saving the past for the future"

New Jersey's Forest Fire Lookouts 2012

Fire is the one constant that remains in New Jersey's wooded areas, whether it be in the sometimes volatile Pinelands or the mountains in the northern part of the state. Weather is of course the dependent factor on this and the eyes of observers in the state's twenty-one fire towers are a measure of prevention here that still goes largely unnoticed by the general public. Most states in the northeast have done away with their fire lookout programs. New Hampshire still retains its lookouts and a few scattered through Massachusetts, even one or two in tiny Rhode Island are operated sparingly by local fire departments on a volunteer basis. Pennsylvania at last calling still maintained some of its venerable fire towers, but the equally forested areas of New York State, Maine, Vermont and Virginia no longer use them and have not for some time. Most southern states with the exception of North Carolina are rapidly removing them. Quite simply the reasons for most are the increased development of the areas they once overlooked and as always shrinking or even non-existent state budgets for such things.

But New Jersey stubbornly clings to its twenty-one vintage fire towers that continue to serve their purpose, along with the state's venerable "brush truck" designs know widely as "the Jersey truck" in fire circles. And the complete story of the state's fire lookout history is still a ways from finished. Those who know of the past history of these places are becoming fewer with each passing year, and the equipment and signage that was once at these places have all but disappeared.

As Historian for the Forest Fire Lookout Association, I have researched this history through the years as a hobby and also because I was so involved with the Forest Fire Service at one time. The continuing progress of finding out facts has slowed to an immeasurable crawl with the passing of time.

In 1909 the stone observation tower that was built by the Kinney family on their estate in the mountains above the Pequannock river valley in upper Passaic County was contracted out by the new State Forest Fire Service so an "observer" could scan that area for the detection of woods fires. Those first years, an employee of the estate served that task during high fire danger times. From time to time during the Great War 1914-1918, persons, and actual family members of the Kinney family, through mutual cooperation with the State watched for fires in the mountains there. A telephone line enabled someone to call the local warden to advise him if any smoke was spotted. It's doubtful there was any sort of a "firefinder" apparatus there, as the next

nearest fire tower in those days was the old Normanook Lookout in Stokes State Forest many miles to the west on the Kittatinny Ridge. Normanook had first been established as a "Sunday picnic spot" probably in the 1880's but not used for fire detection until 1906 when a crude wooden lookout was built there. It is believed that a steel tower was first erected there in 1918-1919 as the very first "paid" lookout operator in State service was appointed there in 1919 by the State Firewarden. The next fire tower built would have been the Windbeam tower in 1920, but earlier than that, a Watershed lookout, a stout fifty-foot massive wood sided tower had been built on Bearfort mountain, replacing and even earlier open platform tower built by the City of Newark for their watershed. In 1917, the State Forest Fire Service engaged in a more robust rental agreement with the Kinney family for the use of their stone tower. This at once met with some problems as it was private property and permission had to be gained each time the observer went up there. Evidently this was due to the possible "over-protectiveness" of the manager of the estate, but the stone tower was used through the years and even into the 1950's long after the Kinney family had sold the property and it became the exclusive mountain community of "Smoke Rise". The tower being on private community property is therefore not open to the public and for me, it was even some years before I finally visited the place one cold January day with Mark Haughwout (VT) and the Security Chief.

The new steel Bearfort fire tower was erected in about 1936-37 on Cedar Mountain, replacing the old wooden structure that had burned in 1932. Bearfort had originally been called to have a 100-foot tower, but was finally opted for a 60-footer of Marshall-McClintock style (USFS design). Also with the erection of the Milton tower and the Greystone tower (ex-Edison tower's upper 50 feet) about 1937, the need for Kinney's old stone tower waned. Yet it still was used occasionally. The sheer numbers of fire lookouts in that area of northern New Jersey testifies to the re-occurrence of wildfires over the years there and even today, in periods of prolonged drought and very low humidity, dangerous situations can develop.

Below is one of the few very rough sketches remaining of a "fire lookout" on Cedar Mountain on the Bearfort Ridge, with its small ground cabin.



This site is believed to have been used as a lookout since the Watershed was first developed in the 1890s. A "tree platform" not more than a few boards placed across branches suffice at first. In 1909 a short iron pipe open deck lookout was there, at some point this taller structure was built, and finally a large two-story wood cabinlike lookout was constructed, probably around 1914. It was completely enclosed by siding and had a very large "squat" cabin on top. The local Firewarden's young daughter stood watch there in 1925. In 1932, the lookout burned in a fire that totally consumed it and for a couple years once more, a nearby tree was used with boards as a "tree lookout". In 1933, the State was looking to place a steel fire tower in the area to take over from the private Kinney tower. By 1937, the present steel tower had been erected.

But all this has been written about here before ... in 2012, the use of fire towers in New Jersey seems to still be well rooted in the Department, so much so that when the new office was built on Route 206 in Andover, the seven A-Division fire towers were immortalized with miniature models of them there and a brass plaque can be seen inside on the wall about them. New Jersey it seems loves its fire towers and is perhaps one of the few die-hard states in the Northeast to use them.

*All of the state's twenty-one fire towers have been placed on the National Historic Lookout Register, along with the Batsto Manor House lookout, and the security tower at Picatinny Arsenal known as "Green Pond Mountain Lookout".

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