

# FOREST PROTECTION BUREAU

## NH Fire Lookout Towers - A Short History

*The following, by permission, from "A Field Guide to New Hampshire Fire towers", by Iris W. Baird and Chris Haartz published for the 1992 Third Annual Conference of the Forest Fire Lookout Association.*

A number of developments in New Hampshire about 1900 set the stage for what became a major cooperative effort in fire detection. First was the heavy "cut and get out" logging which left widespread logging residue. Second came a series of dry summers, which, with sparks from wood-burning locomotives used to haul out the timber, set the woods afire repeatedly in the years 1888 to 1903.

Increased recreational use of the northern woods, led especially by members of the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), brought these conditions to the attention of persons able to translate their concerns into organized action. The New Hampshire Forestry Commission was established in 1881 and The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF) in 1901. By 1909 New Hampshire was sharing the cost of fighting forest fires with the towns, and by 1911 John W. Weeks of Lancaster had secured passage of an act establishing national forests in the eastern United States by arguing that they would provide watershed protection and ensure the supply of power to the textile mills.

In 1908 Philip Ayres, forester for the SPNHF, published a series of articles in The Granite Monthly calling for New Hampshire to take steps to preserve its woodlands. He gave examples from the west and from Maine of, among other things, forest fire lookout stations.

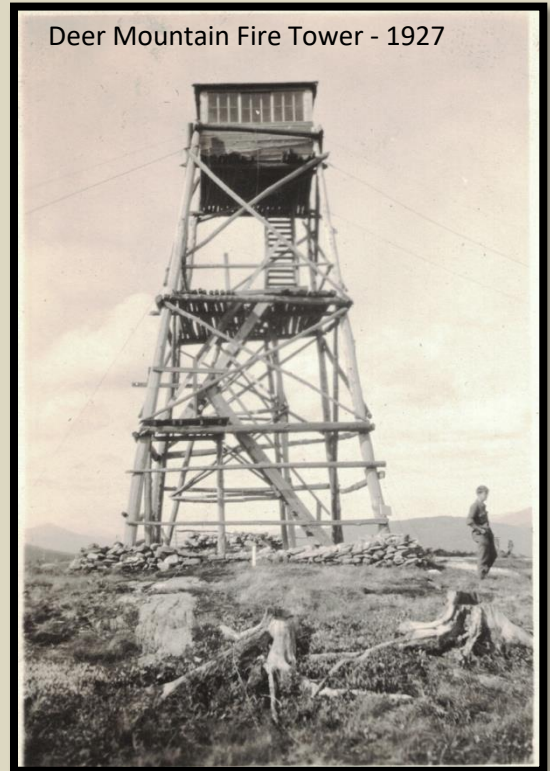
Fire lookouts, permanent fixed sites from which to spot forest fires, originated in the west before 1900. The first lookout in the east was reportedly on Squaw Mt. in Maine in 1905.

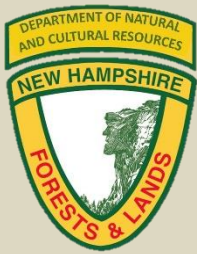
(Note: personal conversation with Iris W. Baird, February 8, 2001 - there is evidence that not only was Croydon station the first New Hampshire tower but it may have been the first in the East as early as 1903.)

In the fall of 1909 the state found itself with \$599.39 of unexpended fire fighting funds, and got permission to purchase telephones, wire and fixtures for five lookout stations. There were already two lookouts on private land: Croydon Peak in the Draper Company-Blue Mountain Park, and Mt. Rosebrook, operated by the Mt. Pleasant Hotel in Crawford Notch.

The AMC, which had title to the summit of Kearsarge North (Pequawket) let a lookout use the ruined hotel on that summit and run a phone line to the valley. With this cooperation from the private sector, New Hampshire entered the lookout business.

Deer Mountain Fire Tower - 1927





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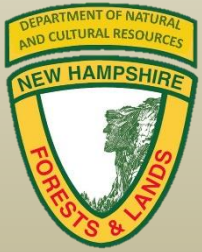


New Hampshire State Forester Edgar C. Hirst next called a meeting in Gorham in March 1910 at which he explained to the major timberland owners what Maine, New York and Vermont were doing and asked for support. The timbermen contributed \$4100 on the spot and organized themselves into the New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association (NHTOA). This group later assessed themselves a penny per acre per year for fire detection, on a total acreage of about a million acres.

In the summer of 1910, ten additional lookouts went into service. Of these, three -- Mt. Agassiz, Mt. Madison and Mt. Moosilauke -- already had some sort of summit occupancy with telephones, with whom contacts could be made. Aziscoos, in Maine, was operated by the Maine Forest Service, with which New Hampshire entered into a cooperative agreement. There was a hotel on Moosilauke, and the AMC caretaker at Madison Hut had a phone connected to Ravine House in Randolph.

The NHTOA supplied funds for seven additional stations: Magalloway, Sugarloaf, Signal, Cambridge Black, Pine, Carrigain and Osceola. As the state made funds available, these stations were taken over by the NH Forestry Commission and twelve more were added. The state built towers on Monadnock, Beech Hill, Federal Hill, Uncanoonuc, Teneriffe and Craney Hill. The NHTOA built stations at Deer Mt. (Pittsburg), Dix Peak, Mt. Cabot, Mt. Chocorua, Black Mt. and Mt. Stinson. In 1912 there were 12 stations owned by the state and another 6 by NHTOA. By 1913 there were 26, the state having added Belknap, Blue Job, Kearsarge South and Pawtuckaway, and NHTOA having dropped Dix Peak and added Mt. Isreal. The federal government was operating Carrigain and Kearsarge North, but had not yet taken ownership of either. By 1917 the state was operating 29 stations. During much of this early period the watchmen, especially those on the NHTOA stations, were woodsmen employed by the timber operators during the winter. They built





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their own cabins and towers, mostly of local materials, and usually of pretty basic design. During the 1920's the state began to replace these rough log structures with steel towers, and to add lightning protection and more sophisticated phone lines. In the 1930's visits by the general public had increased to the point where it seemed wise to replace tower ladders with stairs, and install roadside directional signs and trail markers. The role of the fire lookouts in public education about forest fire prevention led the US Forest Service to print up "squirrel Cards" and pass them out to certify that the holder had visited a tower, and enlist the holder's support for fire prevention.

In 1938 disaster struck. The Great Hurricane blew down much of the northern forest, and a number of towers as well. At the same time the Civilian Conservation Corps provided manpower and materials for major rehabilitation. During the 1939-1940 period the state added towers at Bear Hill, Miller Park, Sam's Hill and Warner Hill, and the US Forest Service built towers at Cherry Mt., Cooley Hill, Deer Mt. (Kilkenny), Grandview, Iron Mt., Mill Mt. and West Royce.

During World War II many of the towers shut down for lack of manpower. The US Forest Service recruited WOOFs (Women Observers on the Forest) to staff a number of stations, including Black Mt., Cherry Mt., Chocorua, Pequawket (Kearsarge North) and Cooley Hill. By 1948 the use of aircraft for fire spotting and a decline in fire danger led to the closing of many stations. The US Forest

Service marked ten towers for demolition and retained seven, some on inactive status. By the end of the 1960's these were all out of service and only the state towers were left. (Abandoned towers were believed to be hazardous, so many of these were removed over the next decade.)

From time to time, especially in dry summers, various private observation towers around the state were called into service as temporary lookouts. It

was also department policy to supplement the tower network by using as observers people who lived on high ground and had good views of their surrounding territory. By 1980 only 22 towers were in operation. Three aerial detection routes were operated by four private aircraft contractors. By 1982 the network was reduced to 14 towers; all were closed by June 9, 1983 for lack of funds. At this time the towns around Rock Rimmon tower requested and received permission to man the tower on a volunteer basis.

The next year the towers were operated on a part-time basis. The following year weather turned dry and the towers had to get extra funds and remain open many more hours. In 1992, 16 stations were in service, 15 funded by the state and one (Red Hill) by the town of Moultonboro. This continues to be the case today.

Historical documents:

The Mountain Lookout Service - [Excerpts from the 1909-10 Biennial Report of the Forestry Commission](#)



Kearsarge Fire Tower - 2019