



**Forest Fire Lookout Association
New York State Chapter
March 2020**

March 2020 may end up being a very historic month in US History, but how does that affect fire towers? It is hard to say as of this writing. Perhaps it will not have much of an effect. That is my hope. It does make me think back to our fire tower history and the beginnings of World War Two. As men were called to battle, fire towers became empty. The number of fires reported went down significantly, but the number of fires began to increase. How were towers to be staffed? Women were asked to step in. Many had never worked outside the home at all, much less at a fire tower. Some were very familiar as they were married to or related to Observers who went to war. Other inexperienced persons began to staff the towers as well. The Observers who were asked to go to war and the women who filled in for them were asked to take significant steps into the unknown. Would they have a job when they returned from the war, if they returned? Many started vegetable gardens at the Observer's cabins as obtaining food became more difficult. Ration coupons were issued but what could go to the tower and what was needed at home? That is similar to what is happening now. There are many unknowns, including jobs and groceries and yes even who will survive. The men and women from our fire tower history took that brave step forward, persevered and moved on. It is my hope that we will be able to do so as well in 2020.

The State Chapter and other friends groups have many plans for 2020, most which require winter to be gone and spring to be in full swing. At this time, I am going to keep those plans all on the schedule in hopes that we can move forward as originally planned. If things change, I will be sure to let everyone know. In the meantime, Be calm. Be kind to one another. Be well.

Spring Fire Season

With a shortage of snow on the ground, low humidity and winds, wildfires began early. In Sullivan county the weekend of February 22nd and 23rd, several fires popped up. That same Sunday the 23rd, our neighbors to the south had a major fire break out in hard to reach territory, the Delaware Water Gap. <https://www.mcall.com/news/breaking/mc-nws-mt-tammany-fire-delaware-water-gap-20200223-kadwuqtlizgxfpszwpefglgpqe-story.html> By February 28th there was little relief and a fire took off in Tuxedo that caused a shut down of the NYS Thruway for a time. The Forest Ranger report tells of a fire on March 9th in Kent that scorched 28 acres. The largest was perhaps the one that occurred on Breakneck Ridge on March 9th and lasted for a few days until rains came along. <https://www.poughkeepsiejournal.com/story/news/local/2020/03/10/breakneck-ridge-burns-brush-fire-season-hits-dutchess/5008519002/> The photo in this article is worth a look! The Forest Ranger report states a total of 277 acres burned. This is very steep and rocky terrain and the winds drew the fire right to the summit after jumping a major State Highway.

It would not have been uncommon to have the fire towers in the Hudson Valley staffed by March. They would likely have seen all of the fires noted here and perhaps gotten resources there a bit quicker. In speaking with Bob Wolf from neighboring New Jersey Catfish fire tower recently, he tells me those towers have been staffed since February and they have had 182 wildfires with thousands of acres burned already this season!

Ban on Brush Burning: To try to prevent more spring wildfires, the NYS DEC has enacted the State Wide Burn Ban again. “DEC reminds residents that the statewide ban prohibiting residential brush burning begins March 16, and runs through May 14. Conditions for wildfires are heightened in springtime when most wildfires occur. Every spring as the snow melts and vegetation dries out, New York's partnering local responders all too often have to leave their jobs and families to respond to wildfires caused by illegal spring debris fires. DEC Forest Rangers respond to and assist local agencies with the larger and more remote fires. Complying with the burn ban prevents unnecessary burdens on and dangers to state resources and local responders, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 public health crisis.”

Trivia for February: We often see lookouts in the west accessed by horseback. How many currently standing fire towers in NYS have marked horse trails to their summits? Can you name them? A Centennial Patch to the winner! Several people sent in some answers, some of which were partially correct. At this time, to the best of my knowledge, there are only 2 standing towers with marked horse trails; Hunter and Sugar Hill. Several folks thought Summit Hill in Allegheny State Park was another one, but the park tells me all of the trails around the summit area are a big mountain biking area. There are no horse trails anywhere near the summit areas because bikes can scare the horses. Historically Observers went to many towers via horse or mule, but that use has changed over the years. Thanks to all who participated!

Trivia for March: What mountain is featured in this photo from 1917 that includes both the steel and wooden towers? A Centennial patch for the winner!



Facebook Page: I am well aware that not everyone uses Facebook or other forms of social media. I do think it is important to our chapter to be connected to social media and our page proves that. We have a lot of great conversations, photo sharing and more there. To keep things fresh and lively, we added a monthly photo contest. We encourage people to post a fire tower photo taken during that month from any year. We encourage both current pictures and historical photos. The photo with the most likes becomes our monthly cover photo. If you have some you would like to share, please consider entering the contest. If you are not on Facebook, but do have a photo you would like to share, let me know.

Paypal: We were notified that our Paypal donations was not working correctly, but Gary appears to now have it fixed! Thank you Gary! <http://www.paypal.com/us/webapps/mpp/search-cause>

Opportunities to help out fire towers and cabins this summer: *Note this is all volunteer work

Lyon Mountain Fire Tower Trail work June 13-14 and Sept 19-20

Pillsbury Fire Tower work July 25-26, Aug 1-2, Aug 8-9

Kane Observer's cabin Oct 3-4

Blue Observer's cabin May 2-3, May 9-10

Vandewhacker Observer's cabin (with ADK 46ers*) – July 11-12, July 25-26, Aug 8-9

Poke O Moonshine trail (with ADK 46ers*)– Aug 1-2

*with ADK 46ers work, you can sign up on their web page and you do not have to be a 46er to participate: <http://www.adk46er.org/trail-crew.html>

Please take note of these dates and think about lending a hand on one or two projects – we would love to have you and promise it will be fun!

Opportunities are available for Volunteer Stewards at the following fire towers

Mount Tremper: Mount Tremper is seeking new volunteers for 2020 and a new volunteer Coordinator starting in 2021. If interested, please contact Mark at tremperfiretower01@gmail.com

Sterling: Susan shared she will be looking for volunteers to help out at the Fire tower for the next season. If anyone is interested, please email Susan at sterlingfiretower01@gmail.com.

Stillwater: Stewards are wanted to sign up for weekends from Memorial Day to Columbus Day at this newly restored fire tower. Contact Laurie if interested lauriejrankin@gmail.com

Book of the month: We are going to look outside of NYS for this one. *Remembering Missouri's Lookout Towers* by Bob Frakes is the book I am choosing this month. I choose it for two reasons; one how I found out about it and two the format of the book. For those of you who are FFLA Members you know there are no advertisements in our magazine, *The Lookout Network*. There are some great fire tower book options in the back of the magazine though and that is where you will find this book. Secondly I am used to our NY books with great factual and anecdotal information. The author of this book has included other items too such as technical information, maps, associated equipment and more. It looks like a great read – you may wish to check it out! It is available from Amazon.

Training for stewards: Fire Tower Stewards both paid and volunteer should all be sending the same messages to visitors including Leave No Trace messages. Sometimes it is rather difficult to get to LNT classes and sometimes they are cost prohibitive. To see what it is all about, consider taking this quick and free on line course. Don't forget to print a certificate if you do.

<https://lnt.org/get-involved/training-courses/online-awareness-course/>

Stewardship Appreciation Awards: From the NYSDEC announcements - *“The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is now accepting nominations for the inaugural 2020 Stewardship Appreciation Awards, DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos announced today. “Partnerships are invaluable to DEC's efforts to promote outdoor recreation and provide a positive visitor experience, said Commissioner Seggos.” This new awards program will recognize the efforts of volunteers and partners in improvement, outreach, and stewardship projects on state lands, waters, and at DEC facilities.*

Nominees must have one of the following formal agreements with DEC:

- *An active Volunteer Stewardship Agreement (VSA);*
- *A current Memorandum of Understanding;*
- *A current Use and Occupancy Agreement; or*
- *Proof of organized volunteer activities on State lands.*

Completed nominations for the 2020 awards must be submitted by Thursday, April 30. Award winners will be announced in September. Additional information about the award program, including a 2020 nomination form, can be found on DEC's [website](#). Nomination forms can also be requested via email to adventureny@dec.ny.gov, or by writing to the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, Adventure NY, 625 Broadway, 14th Floor, Albany, New York 12233-1010.”

Nominations are being accepted through April 30th. Please nominate your favorite organization.

Forest Preserve Fire Tower Steward Funding Available: If your group has a paid fire tower steward, you should have gotten word from the NYSDEC about this possible funding source. You would need to meet the following criteria: be a municipality or a 501c3, have a VSA with NYS, submit the completed application by April 30th, submit proof of workers compensation, and proof of disability coverage. If you need more information, please let me know.

Around the State

Hadley: Are you a college student looking for a great summer job? They are currently accepting applications for the 2020 Summit Guide on Hadley Mountain. For more details on the job description and how to apply, visit www.hadleymtfiretower.org and check under Current News. Applications are due by April 1st!

Bramley: Friends of Bramley Mountain Fire Tower have been very busy during this time. They have created a very nice web page: <https://bramleymountainfiretower.org/> In addition if you are a social media user they have a Facebook page as well. Simply search Bramley Mountain Fire Tower and like the page!

Swede: Progress on this project was recently in the news. Warren County officials have plans to utilize the inmates from Moriah Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility to build the new trail this spring. Once that is complete, the fire tower will be restored. Many thanks to the Towns of Hague and Horicon, Warren County and local citizens for all of their work on this the last several years to make this a reality. <https://www.adirondackdailyenterprise.com/news/local-news/2020/02/new-fire-tower-trail-expected-to-open-this-summer-in-hague/> Unfortunately this news article seems to have encouraged people to go visit the fire tower. THIS IS TRESPASSING! Please refrain from visiting the site until you hear the tower is open or that you may be needed for volunteer work on the tower or trail. Many have worked hard behind the scenes for the last couple of years to try to reopen this tower. Please do not jeopardize all of that work by trespassing.

Sterling: Susan is looking for volunteers to welcome visitors to the Fire Tower as noted above. In addition, Sterling Park Manager Mike McElroy has plans to do some work on the cabin, including removing the porch roof, installing gutters, and replacing damaged roof shingles this year.

Stillwater: The Friends of Stillwater Fire Tower group met this spring and reviewed their new VSA (volunteer service agreement) application from NYSDEC. They sent many questions to me about the VSA and after many discussions, it was decided that they would not renew their VSA. With the blessings of the Friends of Stillwater Fire Tower, the NYS Chapter of the FFLA has agreed to hold the VSA for Stillwater fire tower. This wonderful group of volunteers who lovingly restored the fire tower during the last VSA, completed a new trail, held a centennial and now greet visitors will still remain very actively involved. The FFLA is very grateful they have agreed to do so. We will continue things much as they were done in the past. Those of you who are interested in continuing as fire tower stewards or would like to join the fun as a fire tower steward, please reach out to me, and we will get you started.

Mt Arab: The Friends of Mt Arab plan to continue their steward program this year, and they plan to install new windows in the fire tower cab. Would you consider lending them a hand? <http://friendsofmtarab.org/index.html>

Hurricane: https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/view_finder/summiting-a-snowy-hurricane-mountain
Some nice local press for a snowy Hurricane fire tower!

St. Regis: This is a great article about fire towers and a hike to one. Wonderful photos capture each step! <https://www.saranaclake.com/story/2020/a-historic-snowshoe-hike>

Calendar

Tuesday, June 23rd 7:00pm: Marty Podskoch, Laurie Rankin and the Friends of Bramley Mt Fire Tower presentation at the Canon Free Library in Delhi.

Thursday, September 3rd 6-8:00 p.m., at the Adirondack History Museum in Elizabethtown, Marty Podskoch will present about Adirondack Fire Towers and highlight Kempshall and West. They will do a reception with BBQ, maybe another special fire tower brew, and fire tower cake.

As promised earlier this year, you would see a guest columnist here from time to time. This month, our neighbor in Massachusetts, Jack Kelley writes a great article about cooperation. Thanks Jack!

Cooperative Quarterly: Alander Mountain and Mervin Whitbeck - Written by Jack Kelley

While I admit I am not an expert on New York fire towers, I do have a fair amount of knowledge on the towers that bordered it, particularly Massachusetts, Vermont, and Connecticut. A few times a year, I'd like to write about these cooperative towers, giving readers of the newsletter a bit of information on observers and towers that New York often worked with. Why not start out, then, with the story of an observer who actually worked for both New York and Massachusetts?

Mervin Whitbeck was born December 8, 1905, in Mount Washington, a tiny community in the corner of southwest Massachusetts that sits at the meeting point of the New York and Connecticut state lines. He had five brothers, including a twin, and four sisters. One of his brothers, Ezra Whitbeck, would later go on to be an observer at the nearby Mt. Everett fire tower with the state of Massachusetts for many decades. As Mervin grew up, he learned many valuable skills from his family, his father Isaac in particular, who was a legendary rattlesnake hunter in the state, capturing many snakes for the Central Park Zoo. However, as Mount Washington was a very remote place in the 1900's, and remains one even by today's standards, there were not many job opportunities for young men aside from what could be found in the surrounding wilderness. Mervin was able to procure employment locally, working under an entrepreneur named Frederick K. Miles.



Mervin began working in the world of fire lookouts with Mr. Miles in 1928, when he was only 23. Mr. Miles owned a business at the foot of Alander Mountain in Mount Washington that produced charcoal from the heavily-forested surrounding hills, the remains of which are still very evident on the trail up the mountain today. He held the title to a large swath of land in Massachusetts' section of the Taconics, and this land, along with his business, needed to be protected from the dangerous forest fires that were common at the time. That is why he accepted the request in 1928 from New York's Taconic State Park Commission to allow them to build a fire tower on the summit of Alander Mountain, overlooking territory across both states.

In the photo to the right, courtesy of Melissa Miller, a Taconic State Park historian who retrieved it from the Mt. Washington town hall, Mervin Whitbeck can be seen standing on the tower's fourth landing. It was taken one year after the 60' Aermotor LS-40 was constructed, and I can only imagine the incredible view that must have been possible from up there. When the tower was built in 1928, .2mi from the New York border, the state of New York provided funding for the construction of the lookout and an observer's camp, which still stands just below the summit, though it has seen better days. While Mervin worked at the tower, everything went according to plan: Mr. Miles's charcoal business was safe, and so was the Taconic State Park. It was when the tower wasn't staffed at all, however, that things went awry.



The fire season of 1930 was a hot, dry, and dangerous one. For the town of Mount Washington, this became apparent when a forest fire started in early May in the hamlet of Boston Corner, New York, just over the mountains, and quickly spread out of control, burning thousands of acres in New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, who all contributed men to the cause of putting it out. Many locals from Mt. Washington, likely including Mervin himself, also helped in any way they could.

After days of battling it from dusk to dawn, following its path over the Taconics and through dense forest, including around the base of the fire tower itself, a much-needed rainstorm drowned out the fire. The total cost was \$200,000. Adjusted for inflation, though? The fires caused roughly \$3,100,000 dollars in damages and efforts to put it out. Understandably, Mr. Miles was a bit upset. People had been threatened, and the trees from which he made a living had burned. Most upsetting of all, however, was that the fire tower he did not own, the purpose of which was to protect land that he did, for unknown reasons was not even staffed during the period of heightened fire danger that the conflagration started in. He contacted the Taconic State Park Commission and immediately ordered that the fire tower be removed. It had only been built two years earlier. They complied, and by the end of 1930, the steel pieces were being stored within the park for reconstruction. The footings are all that remains of the tower at its original site on Alander Mountain. It was rebuilt two more times, once at Mt. Washburn in Copake Falls, New York, and a final time at Beebe Hill in Austerlitz, New York, but they are stories for another day.

Mervin Whitbeck, out of a job after the tower's swift removal, continued to live in Mount Washington, and found work elsewhere. Over the course of his life, he operated a deer hunting lodge, was a town constable, hunted the first wildcat seen in Mount Washington since 1928 (in 1934) with the help of his brothers, killed a 55in rattlesnake, and worked for the town's highway department, among numerous other positions. As mentioned earlier, his brother Ezra Whitbeck found a job at the Mount Everett fire tower, acting as observer there for 29 years. Mervin passed away at age 55 in 1961 of a heart attack, his wife, son, and two daughters remember him fondly.

Laurie Rankin, Director
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www.ffla.org