

Bear Mountain's lost Fire Tower

The Bear Mountain Fire Tower was erected in 1923 on the true summit of Bear Mountain in the Northeastern part of Harriman/Bear Mountain State Park NY. Originally the mountain is thought to have been named "Bare mountain" because in early pioneer days, so many fires had burnt the sides and top. Henry Hudson's log refers to it as "Baer hill" But by the Revolutionary War days it was being called Bear Mountain.

In the early days of West Point Military Academy, the Army owned much of that area including a good bit of Bear Mountain itself. Through land deals with the new State Park established by Mary Harriman in 1901, and by the 1920's, the summit was traded by the Army for other parcels of land nearer the academy.

In 1923, a steel fire tower was erected on the summit of Bear Mountain by the State Park Commission that was in it's infancy and through mutual cooperation with the State Conservation Department. It was staffed by Park Rangers, and probably at first did not, if ever, have a power line to it. It was a 60 foot tower, having 9 landings and it is identified from the other Park towers by having 9 panes of glass in each window sash or 18 small panes per side of the observation cab.*



It stood on the summit of Bear Mountain until 1930 when it's said it was removed possibly for the reason that the new Perkins Memorial Tower was being built about 300 feet to the west. This 50 foot stone tower remains today as the Appalachian Trail passes by its base.

The Perkins Tower when completed could be used for observation, which made the steel tower obsolete at that location. The footings still exist on the old tower's site on the massive rock face. Before then, there had been a wooden "signal tower" on the rock face used for surveying or early fire spotting.

A postcard of Signal Tower #54 was provided many years ago by Fred Knauf; former NY State FFLA chapter director.

Photos of the Bear Mountain tower have long been sought; these and others come by way of FFLA member Jerry Kiernan of Cornwall-on-Hudson NY. The above photo at this date isn't known if in fact it is of the tower as it looked on Bear Mountain's summit or its later location on Diamond Mountain in the western part of Harriman State Park.

In any event, after 1930, with the steel tower removed, the Perkins stone tower was completed and open in 1933 under the CCC administration. It remains as a "private" tower but open to the public

and is managed and funded by the Perkins family through the State Park. At some point, it was realized a lookout tower was needed in the heavily wooded western end of the State Park. A steel tower was built on Fingerboard mountain, near old Beaver Pond, later-day Lake Tioroti. This was a standard LS-40 Aermotor model and it had 4-pane windows in each sash (8 per side) The below photos of the Ranger sighting through the "fire-finder" are taken in Fingerboard tower's cab. *Note the 4 pane window configuration behind.



The sighting device is also unique as a small sighting tube that pivots on the center pin of the plane table.

The bottom photo was provided by Larry Paul some years ago and is one of the very few close up photos of the site. The phone line pole in the foreground still can be found at the site above Tioroti Lake near the Appalachian Trail.

← The Ranger here is thought to be an early photo of Tim Sullivan possibly when he served as a New York State Forest Ranger.

← Fingerboard Mountain fire tower circa 1978;Larry Paul

Fingerboard was located in the very center of the Harriman State Park but unfortunately, it suffered greatly from vandalism and was removed in the early 1980's.



Diamond Mountain fire tower was erected using the former Bear Mountain steel tower; date of this exactly is unknown. but these photos from Jerry Kiernan are believed to be of the old Bear Mountain tower as built at that location. Note the same 18 pane per side window configuration. Years afterward when I became a New Jersey District Forest Firewarden, with help from Section Firewarden Kevin Drake, Bill Wilmouth

and Bill Orlando and with Ranger Sullivan facilitating we rescued the steel frames and observation cab parts from the salvage yard at Merrit Bank in Harriman State Park, and spirited the remains away in two flatbed truckloads to the Division yard then at Franklin, NJ. A few days

afterward, Bill Wilmouth made a trip to New York, and with Ranger Sullivan's help, retrieved the set of aluminum sash windows from Tim's Iona Island "bone yard". These were from the second Diamond Mountain fire tower that had been erected in 1966, after the first one (the old Bear Mountain tower) had been taken down.



<- This is believed to be another photo, different angle than the upper of the first tower when it stood on Diamond mountain. Larry Paul remembers visiting the tower here on hikes in the Park and commenting "*It was the only fire tower I'd visited where the cab was painted green*"

The original name for the hill was called Halfway Mountain on early maps- then later Diamond mountain. The tower had no power line and no phone line as it was in a very remote location and because of that, it became the target unfortunately of severe vandalism that continually destroyed the windows and was broken into. Probably for those

reasons, it was removed finally in the early 1950's. But by the 1960's, forest fire again plagued the heavily used Park. The nearest State operated fire tower was at Sterling Forest, some eleven miles to the west and on private access property. The steel fire tower that had been built on Jackie Jones mountain was also too far away to adequately see the western section of the Park. Ranger Sullivan lobbied the Administration to again, get a tower erected on Diamond mountain. He was successful and a new steel LS 40 Aermotor tower was purchased and shipped to New York. The steel frames from this tower were stenciled profusely with the shipping information "**Diamond Mountain Road, Palisades Inter-State Park NY**". The one different feature of this tower were its windows, they were a modern design double aluminum frame; one per side. These were provided by the Park.

The new fire tower was in use by 1966, but still there was no power line or phone line run to the tower that was only a short distance from heavily hiked to; Pine Meadow Lake. Again, vandalism took its toll. Ranger Sullivan manufactured a round "plane" or map table for the tower that curiously did not have Diamond mountain's location in its center. It was made by piecing together different map sections of the Park, and showed the location of Jackie Jones and Fingerboard fire towers. He also had made several aluminum "pointers" graduated off in "mile etchings". Through the 1960's and especially during the bad forest

fire years of 1963 and 1964, Diamond mountain was extensively in use, however the availability of portable radios that had a good range, plagued fire fighters, in these mountainous areas.

Dave Quam remembers flying over-top the Diamond mountain fire tower in his float-plane on fire patrol flights for New York and New Jersey. But with a decrease in Park personnel and maintenance problems, and continued vandalism, it was to finally doom Diamond Mountain's steel fire tower. Final hikes there in the late 70's and early 80's by Larry Paul recall the last times the tower stood. Before 1983, it was removed by the Park and its parts taken to the Merrit Bank yard where it joined the steel of the Fingerboard tower and the original Bear Mountain fire tower.



<- A large wildfire spotted from Jackie Jones fire tower on the Ramapo mountains looking toward Lake Tioroty; Date unknown. The large communication antenna were called one of the "Seven hills to Boston" as it relayed TV signals from New York to New England. Below: A rare photo of an early Amphibian hulled plane, 2 engine, dropping water on the

side of Bear Mountain *₁ during a fast moving wildfire. The Bear Mountain fire tower can faintly be made out on the summit as flames are racing toward it. Date unknown, but the Bear Mountain bridge seen in lower left was opened in 1927 and the tower only stood until 1930 so it gives a possible indication of the age of the photo. The bridge over Popolopen Gorge to Fort Montgomery



can be seen in the lower right hand corner, also the Bear Mountain roadway that became Route 6 along the Mountain's flank.

The fire history of the Orange, Rockland, Counties is well noted in the State's history as at times, being devastating and costly to fight aggressively, yet fire towers such as Bear Mountain, Diamond and Fingerboard mountain were taken down for reasons of maintenance or vandalism. Jackie Jones was returned to Park control in the 1960's*2 after having been operated since 1931 by the State Fire Control. It has since served extensively each fire season as the last remaining fire tower in Harriman State Park. Perkins or PMT is utilized also as a lookout during high fire danger and is a public observation as well as a National Historic Site both Federal and on the National Historic Lookout Register.

The Sterling Fire Tower built in 1922 was last operated as a cooperative fire lookout with New Jersey in 2007 and now, its future is a

gray area. It now is part of Sterling Forest State Park.



Park NY

Notes: During my service at Sterling Fire Tower as a volunteer and then a 9 year New York State employee, I was able to gather together a lot of the parts and pieces of the old Harriman fire towers, I once had 9 quarter-sections of roof material of 3 separate towers. I also salvaged the window sashes of the Bear Mountain's 18 pane windows, Fingerboard's 4 pane sashes plus the new Diamond mountain's aluminum sash windows. The footing shoes and the stairway sections of which some went to other lookout projects underway in the State. I attempted to remove all that to what I hoped was a safe place within the Park when I left in 2007. Unknown what the present condition of this material is today. RS

The Ranger/Observers that served the State of New York were decommissioned with the State's remaining fire towers by 1989. The New York State Forest Rangers in their new roll in State Police law enforcement still actively are engaged in wildfire-fighting but generally coordinate efforts with local Departments.

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The rare photos in this short history are certainly treasured items of the past. Hopefully, more will surface in the future.

*Bob Spear, Historian FFLA
Jerry Kiernan Lookout Researcher; Bear Mtn. State*

NOTES

***1** This photo is now thought to be looking at Anthony's nose, the very tall mountain on the east side of the Bear Mountain bridge; Westchester County. The Bear Mountain bridge seen would then be looking north. During the Revolutionary War, the first Hudson river chain to stop British warships from sailing up the river was built across the river here, held up by floating Chev de' fris'; pointed bastions of logs designed to impede the advance.

***2** The 1960's were very dry years for the northeast. In New Jersey's Pinelands in 1964 a devastating wildfire that burned a good portion of Ocean County rivaled those of Colonial times. A 21 mile fire line was held by hundreds of volunteer fire fighters and the State Forest fire service. At the same time, a large out of control fire burned through the New Jersey Meadowlands and others fires burned throughout the northeast. All fire towers were operated, those in the NJ / NY Highlands were especially watchful for wildfires starting in the dry mountainous region.

***3** There is documentation that a steel fire tower was also erected on the summit of Tom Jones Mountain in Harriman State Park in 1923 at the same time the Bear Mountain tower was erected, but no foundations of it have been said to been found and little else, perhaps another "Lost fire tower story?"

Ranger Kiernan has advised that the aluminum double windows from the second Diamond mountain fire tower have since been salvaged by the State Park.

EPILOG

***Bear Mountain's** steel fire tower was built on top a huge slab of glacier rock which forms the very highest top of the mountain. The tower is long gone today but it's footings can still be found there. Three of them short concrete "stubs" that the tower set on and the 4th was embedded into the granite rock itself and "leaded in" ; a process where molten lead and other additives were poured around the angle iron inserted into drill holes in the rock top. From the fire tower's observation cab can be imagined, the entire width and breadth of the "Highlands" could be seen. From Bowling Green mountain in Milton, New Jersey to the far off Catskill mountains nearly a hundred miles away. The historic Hudson Valley was below in both directions north and south to the environs of New York City and the Atlantic Ocean beyond. Northward, beyond Kingston and northeastward to the Berkshire mountains bordering Massachusetts. Farther west would be the Pocono mountains in Pennsylvania and Windom High Peak on the Catskill escarpment where the land sloped northward toward the Mohawk and the lower Adirondacks of New York State.

Because of its proximity to highly visited hiking trails, the tower suffered severely from vandalism and Park personnel were scarce to operate it on a regular basis. Barely seven years after it was erected, it was taken down in 1930 and languished for a time unused until finally it was re-erected on Diamond Mountain in the South section of the Park. At that location, known as Diamond Mountain fire tower, it again was subject to vandalism and miss-use and never had power or phone connections. Again it was taken down and in 1966 a new steel tower was erected in its place. This "Diamond Mountain tower" was also removed in later years, and it's bones were dumped at the Merritt Bank salvage yard in the park.

Finding the parts laying there unused one day, I contacted Chief Ranger Tim Sullivan who agreed to turn over the old angle iron to the New Jersey Forest Fire Service and it was spirited away in several truckloads to the Franklin, New Jersey headquarters yard. Some of the pieces were used for spare work but for the most part, they lay undisturbed until the Division wanted to clean up the yard one day. Threatened again to be consigned to a junk yard, the remaining parts were taken to Aeroflex Airport in Andover which The Service owned. They lay there in a jumbled pile for years, covered over by vines and autumn leaves. Some sections were used in various restoration projects going on in the Catskills of New York, and even at Beebe Hill, New York on that project. Old towers don't fade away they just get re used it seems!

When I started work at Sterling Fire Tower in New York, the pieces again were threatened to be cut up for scrap steel, so I took it upon myself and surreptitiously hauled as much of it as I could get away with to Sterling Forest Fire Tower. I saved all the pieces of three observation cabs, some of these the original 1923 Bear Mountain fire tower. Many parts were used for repairs at Sterling tower.

When I left the employ of New York State, I hauled as much of the remaining steel down to the Park maintenance yard off county route 84 and that is the last place I knew them to be, behind the back garage on the outside of the fence. One of the Aermotor clamps I brought with me to Florida as a keepsake and also the top of the tower cab that once sat 70 feet in the air with a terrific view in all directions!

With the passing of Ranger Sullivan, that vast archive of knowledge was also gone now and all that remains are the few facts I am familiar with.

Bob Spear; November 17th, 2015

In Memoriam, “No recounting of stories about Bear Mountain can be complete without paying due respect to Ranger Tim Sullivan. His duties of nearly 62 years of working for the State of New York ranged from Fire Tower operator at Jackie Jones, to service with the Park Police and State Forest Rangers until being appointed as Chief Ranger, Palisades Region, in charge of Fire Control, Search & Rescue and all-around Historical information archive. During World War II in the U.S. Marines, he served with a bunch of “tough hombre’s” on Guadalcanal which gained him his “one-word description” Respect.

A Ranger’s Ranger, as best described, he loved the Bear Mountain woods and knew the terrain by memory of miles of hiking its foot paths and climbing its hilly terrain. Personally, I consider myself “enriched” beyond measure to have worked with him “Good Deal!” was his oft-touted saying in answer to a day’s activities report. Indeed it was Tim...always a Good Deal...

Ranger Sullivan was also an annual member of the FFLA and was a keynote speaker at several Conferences held in the Regional area. His words were also eagerly listened to each Spring at the Annual Fire Cooperators meeting held at National Park Headquarters at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.



Chief Ranger Tim Sullivan, Bear Mountain State Park, N.Y.
A Ranger’s Ranger of the first magnitude.