



Mount Adams fire tower may be saved

Lee Manchester

Lake Placid News, May 14, 2004

ADIRONDAC — Until recently, most Adirondack observers thought the fire tower on Mount Adams was a goner. A pending decision, however, may keep it standing on private land surrounded by the High Peaks Wilderness.

Of the 110 steel fire towers built across New York state between 1909 and 1950, 57 were built in the Adirondacks. Of those 57 towers, only 31 are left:

- 11 have been, or are in the process of being, restored;
- 8 are used as bases for radio relay equipment;
- 6 are now on private land, and
- 6 remain standing on state land.

The fire tower atop Mount Adams is one of a rare, dying breed, and preservationists have been keen to save it for that reason alone.

There is, however, another equally compelling reason to rejoice at prospect of sparing the Mount Adams tower: the view.

Without the fire tower, there is no reason to climb 3,540-foot Mount Adams except the pure, abstract pleasure of conquering yet another peak. The top of Mount Adams is so thick with pine trees that one can see nothing from its sum-

mit, despite the fact that it is less than 6 miles from Mount Marcy, in the heart of the Adirondacks.

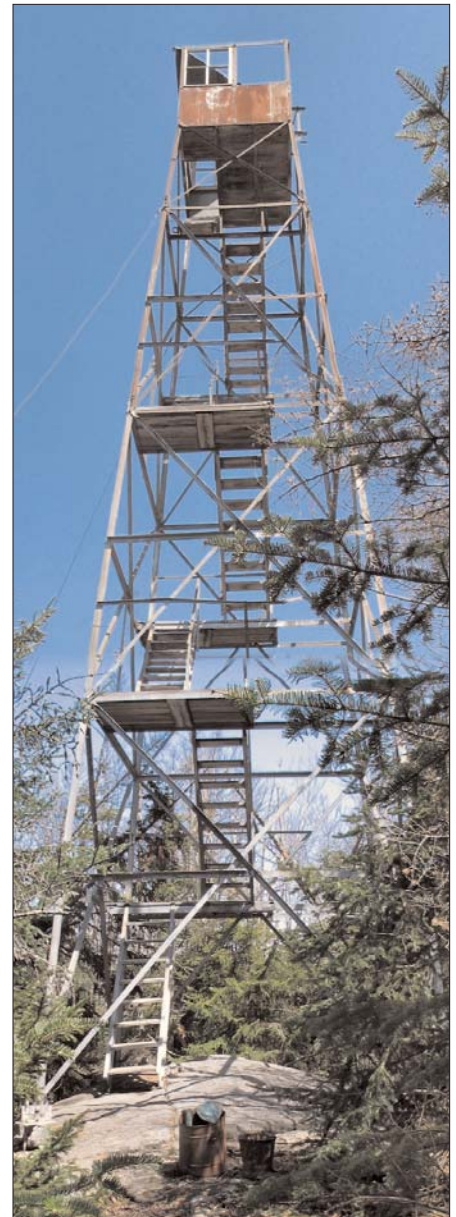
The 47-foot fire tower atop Mount Adams, however, is high enough to rise above the forest canopy. Step-by-step, tower visitors can climb into a 360-degree view of some of the most spectacular scenery the Adirondacks has to offer.

Trailhead directions

The hike to the fire tower on Mount Adams begins at the DEC trailhead for the Hanging Spear Falls trail to Flowed Lands, just outside the mining ghost town called Adirondac.

It will take you about an hour and a half by car to reach Adirondac from Lake Placid. Take Route 73 south from Lake Placid through Keene and Keene Valley to the Northway, Interstate 87. Go south one exit to Exit 29 at North Hudson, and follow the signs west on county Route 2, the Blue Ridge Road — one of the bumpiest paved roads in the Adirondacks — toward Newcomb.

At county Route 25, a right-hand turn, you will see signs to the NL Industries MacIntyre Development at Tahawus, and the DEC's High Peaks Wilderness



The photo at the top of the page is the first of a 3-panel panoramic shot showing 180 degrees of the view that can be seen from the top of the Mount Adams fire tower, above. (The other two panels can be seen on the next two pages.)



Area via Upper Works. Go north about 6 miles to a fork in the road — the right fork goes to the old NL plant, closed to visitors, while the left goes toward our trailhead (about 3 miles) and Adirondac (4 miles).

The Flowed Lands trailhead parking lot, on the right, is 100 feet or so past a large stone pyramid-like structure rising from the woods, Adirondac's old iron blast furnace, abandoned in 1856.

If you reach the Adirondac ghost ham-

let, at the end of the road, you've gone too far. Turn around in the High Peaks trailhead parking lot and come back down to the Flowed Lands trail entry.

The hike to Mount Adams

The hike to the Mount Adams fire tower is not a long one, but it ain't easy, either. It's just 2.4 miles from trailhead to summit. What makes the hike so difficult is the 1,800-foot increase in elevation encountered in the last mile or so to Adams' peak. Still, short as the hike is, the hard part is more exhilarating than exhausting, especially if you give yourself plenty of time.

One thing that will make the hike more pleasant is to do it now, early in the season, when temperatures are moderate and the blackflies have not yet hatched. The town of Newcomb does not apply bti on its waterways; the result is that, by August, the air is so thick with Adirondack insect swarms that you'll hardly be able to breathe without a mask.

Just a few steps from the trailhead is the first treat of this hike: a hanging bridge, suspended on steel cables, swaying over the Hudson River. It bounces with each step, but the bridge is so solidly built that you'll get no fear from it, just fun.

A second footbridge leads across a narrow inlet of beautiful little Lake Jimmy. Logs have been sunk across the bottom of the inlet, with planks nailed across them: a sturdy, picturesque pathway over calm, shallow waters.

After crossing the Lake Jimmy footbridge you'll find a couple of nice, large clearings suitable for pitching a tent and building a campfire, complete with stone circles to contain the blaze.



The trail to the Mount Adams fire tower crosses a narrow, shallow inlet of Lake Jimmy on this wooden footbridge.



The observer's cabin

Just a few steps farther and you'll reach the first site associated with the Mount Adams fire tower: two cabins on the edge of a clearing. One, constructed of primitive materials, stands empty. The other is a very small house — and when we say small, we're talking Henry-David-Thoreau-on-Walden-Pond small — containing two steel cots, a small chest of drawers, a table, a sink, and a built-in cabinet.

The asphalt shingles covering its roof and outside walls are ragged and torn; the chimney outside has fallen down; the front porch has collapsed, and a 10-foot addition built onto the back has been destroyed by a fallen tree, but this little house itself is remarkably intact inside, and it appears to be structurally sound.

These two buildings were the home of the fire observers who manned the Mount Adams tower. According to a National Register of Historic Places nomination prepared by fire-tower historian and former fire observer Bill Starr, this small house is the sole surviving example of New York's first mass-produced observers' cabins, designed and built for the DEC in 1922.

"Prior to 1922, just about any type of structure served as living quarters for the forest-fire observers," Starr wrote. "Two other cabin designs, which were introduced at later dates, were also utilized — but of the style of cabin introduced in 1922, the Mount Adams cabin is the only surviving structure within New York state."

The cabin's inhabitants were supplied with fresh water from a small concrete reservoir built about a quarter mile up the brook that runs by the house. A surface pipe brought fresh water all the way

from the reservoir down to the cabin. The reservoir was breached when the fire tower was abandoned in 1972, allowing the brook to flow freely again.

Just beyond the cabin clearing, at the top of a sharp rise, is the cutoff from the main trail to the path up Mount Adams. Several cairns — small piles of stones — will point your way off the main trail, and red or orange surveyor's blazes will guide you farther up the lower slope. The path, unmaintained by the DEC, has been known to become overgrown, but it is not too hard to pick out from the surrounding brush.

The toughest part of your journey to the fire tower starts shortly after you traverse another footbridge, this one very rough, really just a few logs thrown across a mountain stream. After that, the hike becomes nearly vertical for several

long stretches.

Atop one very steep, very rocky, very wet stretch — most folk would call it a stream bed, not a trail — you'll find both a cairn and an orange blaze, placed there as if to assure you, "Yes, you really were supposed to come this way."

Every so often you'll also see a faded red circular DEC trail marker nailed to a tree along the edge of the Mount Adams path, left over from the days when this route was maintained by the state. By and large, however, only the blazes, the cairns, and the well-worn footpath itself survive today to guide you up the mountain.

It's no wonder that an Adirondack Mountain Club book about fire-tower hikes, "Views from on High" by John P. Freeman, rates Mount Adams among the three most difficult climbs in the state.



An elevation marker pounded into the granite peak of Mount Adams directly under the fire tower by the U.S. Geological Survey is missing just one detail: the elevation.

Reaching the summit

Without the fire tower atop Mount Adams, the only way you'd know you had reached the mountain's top was when there wasn't anymore "up" to climb. The pine thicket is so dense, hikers can't catch even a glimpse of the fire tower until they're almost upon it.

But then, suddenly, there it is, rising from the woods: this huge metal thing, with this ruin of a cabin stuck on top.

High winds ripping across the summit of Mount Adams have torn most of the metal roof off the observer's "cab." Scattered around the foot of the steel-girdered tower are flat shards of glass and pieces of wooden frame from the broken windows above. Coiled at the foot of one of the tower's four legs is the severed cord that once, long ago, linked the fire observer's telephone to the outside world.

The tower itself, however, is in surprisingly good shape, considering both its age (built in 1922) and the many years it has been abandoned (since 1972). Only one of the four cables helping to secure it is still in place, yet it stands firm atop Mount Adams — at least for now. Even the wooden steps climbing up the seven flights of stairs inside the tower's framework are all intact — extremely dry and a little spongy, to be sure, but all there and none broken, except at the very top.

Most of the sources we've read about the Mount Adams fire tower have cautioned readers about climbing it, pointing out its dangers. The tower can, however, be climbed, with care — and, after

ascending two or three flights of stairs and mounting above the surrounding forest canopy, you see why so many have advocated so powerfully to let this tower stand: The impact of the view that opens around you is simply stupefying, 360 degrees of stunning, astonishing beauty.

The fire tower

The fire tower now standing on top of Mount Adams is not the first one built there. In 1912, just after the second wave of forest fires in less than a decade swept across the Adirondacks, the state built the first fire tower on Adams' summit, a simple affair made by tying blow-down logs together.

Five years later, in 1917, the state decided to build more enduring structures for their fire spotters. The pieces for the Mount Adams' 47-foot AerMotor LS-40 tower were shipped in by train, then transported by truck to the foot of the mountain. From there, the pieces were hauled to the summit by horse team.

Once all the pieces had been toted to the top, holes were drilled in the rock where the tower's feet would be secured. After that was finished, "the actual job of putting that steel into the air was pleasant relaxation," wrote Kinne Williams, one of the engineers who constructed fire towers for the state at the time. His account appeared in the very first issue of *The Conservationist*, the official publication of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, in 1946.

"But it [the relaxed mood] didn't last.

As our baby grew, it became painfully apparent that the pieces were too long to fit, thanks to incorrectly placed anchor holes. Still, knowing that it was far easier to make the materials at hand into a tower than to get new parts atop our mountain," Williams wrote, "our ingenious rangers decided on a new stunt.

"By loosening all bolts and prizing with bars and distorting with block and tackle, each piece and each hole was eventually fitted into a complete tower.

"When it was finished, however, we found to our amazement that we had constructed not a tower whose legs went straight into the air, to be surmounted by a 7-by-7 enclosure — but a tower whose legs actually spiraled!

"It was literally screwy!"

By the early 1970s, fire spotters in airplanes and helicopters were protecting the Adirondacks from forest fires more effectively and less expensively than had the resident fire observers watching from their mountaintops. That's when the state abandoned towers like the one on Mount Adams.

A tower with a future — probably

Mount Adams is part of a large tract once owned by National Lead, a company that mined titanium during and after World War II at the abandoned Adirondac iron mines operated a century before by Archibald MacIntyre. The tract was purchased last August by a nonprofit organization, the Open Space Institute, with the intention of turning about 6,000 acres over to the state for addition to the Adirondack Forest



At left, a 1974 photo by Bob Eckler of the Model 1922 fire-observer's cabin and storage shed at the foot of Mount Adams, the last of these structures still in existence. At right, the cabin and shed today. The cabin's porch and rear addition have collapsed.

Preserve.

Most people close to the deal expected the state to class the entire addition as “wilderness,” meaning that no human structures left within it would be allowed to stand. Unless some kind of special arrangement were made, the Mount Adams fire tower would have to be dismantled, and the one-of-a-kind 1922 observer’s cabin would have to be removed or demolished.

The Adirondack Council, one of the state’s leading environmentalist organizations, preferred this simple, straightforward approach to the matter.

The region’s other two “green giants,” the Adirondack Mountain Club and the Residents’ Committee to Protect the Adirondacks, sought a compromise that would save the fire tower.

Members of the Adirondack Mountain Club — ADK, for short — had long been fans of the summit towers. The club’s Glens Falls-Saratoga Chapter had even created a special patch distinguishing those who had climbed at least 18 towers in the Adirondacks and 5 towers in the Catskills.

Last year ADK began considering a compromise “to legally permit the existing fire tower to be retained and rehabilitated,” according to an issue paper published on the club’s Web site.

“Under the proposal, the half-acre footprint of the fire tower would be retained by the current owner, OSI, when the balance of the 6,000 acres is transferred to the state for inclusion in the High Peaks Wilderness.”

Since then, several sources have told us, that compromise has become the official goal of ADK.

The RCPA initially envisioned a broader compromise, one that would not only save the Mount Adams fire tower but also allow for the on-site preservation of the 1922 Model observer’s cabin at the mountain’s foot.

“To maintain the Mount Adams fire tower, the RCPA envisions a Wild Forest peninsula [extending] into the enlarged High Peaks Wilderness, of between 10 and 25 acres,” wrote the organization in a January “Call to Action” to preserve the fire tower. The “peninsula” would run from the trailhead to the cabins and up the mountain to the tower.

Recent discussions between the Open

Space Institute, RCPA, ADK and the Adirondack Council indicate, however, that OSI is leaning toward a decision to simply maintain ownership of the half-acre upon which the fire tower stands.

“We had been advocating for a Wild Forest solution,” RCPA’s Peter Bauer told the News on Monday. “It now appears, though, that the tower will be put into a private in-holding, solely for the management of the fire tower.”

John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council, confirmed Bauer’s report.

“We have had some discussions with OSI,” Sheehan said. “They have made an independent decision not to sell the

tower footprint to the state along with the rest of the tract — in which case, we don’t have a lot to say about what happens to that piece of land.”

Sheehan, whose organization had advocated the dismantling of the fire tower, expressed some concern about preserving the structure, even on a mere half-acre.

“A lot has to do with how well OSI manages the site after the remainder is sold to the state,” he said. “We have some concern about directing so many visitors to one spot in the wilderness — but we also have a lot of confidence in OSI’s abilities.”



This DEC archival photo shows the Mount Adams fire tower, under construction in 1917, with Mount Marcy rising in the center background.

'Half-acre solution' not quite final, says OSI

Joe Martens, president of the Open Space Institute, said Tuesday that his organization has not quite reached a final decision about how to save the Mount Adams fire tower.

Regarding the "half-acre solution," Martens said, "That is certainly one alternative we are considering."

"We would like to see the tower 'rehab'ed and preserved, but we want to do it in a way that is both completely legal and that the state will be comfortable with."

"We have been quietly discussing this with some of the environmental groups, but we have not had a discussion with the state groups yet."

The two state agencies at issue are the Department of Environmental Conservation and the Adirondack Park Agency.

"Right now, we think that the cleanest way to handle this is to hold on to just the land under the tower," Martens said, "but we haven't made a final decision yet."

Martens said that decision would probably come by this fall.

Tower may be saved — not the cabin

The "half-acre solution," while making it possible to restore and preserve the Mount Adams fire tower, would not protect the observer's cabin at the mountain's foot. That site would be part of the land that, later this year, OSI is expected to turn over to the state for inclusion in the High Peaks Wilderness Area, where the cabin would be considered a "non-conforming structure."

Martens said he has considered the fate of the Model 1922 cabin, and he has a suggestion concerning its future.

"It's one that won't make everyone happy, but it would preserve a historically significant structure," Martens said.

His suggestion?

"Relocate that cabin."

"We'll do what we can to make that happen," Martens said. "Whatever groups may be interested in the future of the cabin, we'll give them permission to take it down and relocate it."

Martens admitted that such a project would not be an easy one. Once the cabin was disassembled, he said, it would have to be carted nearly a mile to

the trailhead parking lot, traversing both the Lake Jimmy inlet and the Hudson River, before it could be put on a truck for transport to a new, permanent home.

Bill Starr, who has led the battle to preserve both the fire tower and the observer's cabin, has apparently been prepared for the "half-acre solution" for some time.

"I've been told to keep this quiet, but if worse comes to worst," Starr said Monday, "I would at least like to see that cabin dismantled and reconstructed elsewhere."

Whatever happens to the Mount Adams observer's cabin, whatever is required to restore and maintain the fire tower itself, a local Newcomb group has already begun forming to provide the necessary resources.

"The Friends of Mount Adams has had one very informal meeting at my house," said Judy Morris, a Newcomb real-estate agent, on Monday. "We really have no idea how to do this, but we'll get advice from Steve Engelhart, who came to our first meeting."

Engelhart and Adirondack Architectural Heritage have been helpful in organizing several "friends" groups to

restore fire towers throughout the Adirondacks in recent years. Among the towers restored by such organizations are those on Azure, Blue, Hadley, Kane, Snowy and Vanderwacker mountains, Mount Arab, Owl's Head (the one near Long Lake, not Keene) and Poke-O-Moonshine.

Those interested in helping with the future restoration of the fire tower on Mount Adams — and, potentially, the removal and reconstruction of the 1922 Model observer's cabin — can contact the Friends of Mount Adams by calling Joanna Donk in Newcomb at 582-4601.

For more information about the history of the Mount Adams fire tower and observer's cabin, contact Bill Starr in Scotia at 598-4370, or by e-mail at pillsbury_mtn@yahoo.com.

For more information about historic preservation in the Adirondack Park and the restoration of Adirondack fire towers, contact Adirondack Architectural Heritage in Keeseville at 834-9328, or visit their Web site at www.aarch.org.

For more information about the Open Space Institute, which has offices in both Albany and New York City, visit their Web site at www.osiny.org.

