

Save Hurricane!

Petition campaign seeks to protect 86-year-old fire tower in Elizabethtown

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, January 28, 2005

Some folks say that you can't fight city hall — or, in our case, the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

But that's just what Gretna Longware is doing.

Longware is part of a group in Elizabethtown that is circulating petitions to save the fire tower at the summit of Hurricane Mountain.

Standing in the midst of a Primitive Area of the state Forest Preserve, the 35-foot steel tower atop Hurricane Mountain is considered a "nonconforming structure," and for several years has been slated for removal by the DEC.

Emphasis was recently added to those plans by a new report on the future of the region's fire towers, issued by the Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks. The report called for the removal of the tower on Hurricane Mountain.

But locals and fire-tower enthusiasts alike want the tower to stay right where it is.

"We look right out our back window and see it," Longware said. "It's been a landmark for so many years."

Longware's petition campaign started Dec. 14, when a well-known author on fire towers gave a presentation in E-town. In just 6

weeks, the campaign has gathered more than 700 signatures and has won backing from the Elizabethtown Town Board and, this week, from the Essex County Board of Supervisors.

"We are in support of this Fire Tower remaining in its current location on the Summit of Hurricane Mountain," reads the petition. "Since this historic structure was erected in 1919, it has been a significant asset to the area.

"For aesthetic, recreational and historic reasons we request that the tower's current 'non-conforming' status be removed so that this tower can be saved and restored for future generations."

Why remove the tower?

The encouragement given last month by the RCPA to remove the Hurricane Mountain fire tower is nothing new.

The group has taken a fairly consistent stand supporting the preservation of fire towers on Adirondack summits where there would otherwise be no view, such as Mount Adams.

On summits with adequate views of their own, however, and where the towers' presence conflicts with state land-use policy, both the RCPA and the Adirondack Mountain Club encourage their removal.

"Fire towers represent many things to many different people," wrote RCPA executive director Peter Bauer in a Dec. 21 press release accompanying the publication of his group's report, "The Future of Adirondack Fire Towers."

"They are symbols of a nostalgic past, ruins from another era, symbols of the complex relationship of people and the Adirondack Park," Bauer continued. "A dozen fire towers have already been



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY LARRY PAUL

Hurricane Mountain fire tower in 1964 while still in use as a fire observation station.

restored and are terrific models for future restoration efforts. Another 11 should be restored.”

Bauer noted that his organization recommends the removal of only two of the remaining fire towers in the Adirondacks: those on St. Regis and Hurricane mountains. Both towers are “nonconforming structures,” Bauer said, and neither tower adds a thing to the views on their summits.

Why save the tower?

Essex County has several fire towers that have been saved for posterity, including those on Poke-O-Moonshine (south of Keeseville), Vanderwhacker (Minerva township), Belfry (Moriah township), Goodnow and Mount Adams (Newcomb township) — and that’s not counting the tower on exhibition at the Adirondack History Center Museum in Elizabethtown, which was reconstructed from parts of two towers removed from West and Kempshall mountains, in Hamilton County.

So, with six standing towers, why does Essex County need to preserve a seventh?

To Steve Engelhart’s way of thinking, that’s like asking, How many Bach concertos does the world need? How many paintings by Van Gogh? Or buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright?

Engelhart is executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, a Keeseville-based preservation group that has supported the restoration of fire towers throughout the Adirondacks. Last October AARCH convened a conference of leading fire-tower advocates, including the RCPA, at the Silver Bay Association YMCA Conference Center on Lake



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY KEN HUBERT

View from the cab of the Hurricane Mountain fire tower, photographed on Memorial Day weekend 2004.

George.

A year earlier, AARCH had already made its support for the Hurricane Mountain fire tower known to the DEC.

“The fire observation station on Hurricane Mountain is an historic site with great historic and engineering significance,” Engelhart wrote in his letter to DEC Senior Forester Kristofer Alberga. “Twelve state fire observation stations have already been placed on the National Register of Historic Places and, with a few exceptions, all others, including the tower on Hurricane Mountain, have been determined to be eligible for the National Register.”

Engelhart suggested creating a limited historic district on the summit of Hurricane Mountain, an island within the reclassified Hurricane Mountain Wilderness Area. He cited three other locations where similar designations have preserved historic sites within

the state Forest Preserve: John Brown’s farm in North Elba, the Crown Point State Historic Site, and Camp Santanoni in Newcomb township.

Rehabbing Hurricane

The fire observation station on Hurricane Mountain was officially closed in 1973. Today, 32 years later, most visitors to the summit of Hurricane Mountain won’t dispute the RCPA’s summary of the fire tower’s condition:

“The tower is in disrepair and is visibly rusted. Two lower flights of stairs have been removed. ... All the wood is old and the frame is shaky in the wind. No fencing remains, and no guy wires. The cab is open. There are no windows.”

Still, that doesn’t mean that the tower is beyond rehabilitation, says Gretna Longware.

“Actually, the tower doesn’t need that much rehabbing,” she said. “Replace the steps. Paint the

cab. That's about it."

At age 73, Longware says that she can no longer do such work herself — but that a group has formed to manage the rehabilitation of the structure: Friends of the Hurricane Fire Tower.

"I love that place. I took my Girl Scouts up there 35 years ago," Longware said, "but I wouldn't dare do that now. We're going to need to get the younger people involved."

Hurricane Mountain aptly named

Everyone who climbs Hurricane remarks on the strong winds that blow across its summit. One of the earliest accounts of that wind can be found in "The Indian Pass," a book published in 1869 by Adirondack essayist Alfred Billings Street:

"It put me in mind of the Scripture question, 'What went ye

out in the wilderness to see? A reed shaken in the wind?' No, but a crest shaken (nearly) with a whirlwind," Street wrote.

"Most appropriately named is that peak. The wind fairly poured a torrent over it. I have an indistinct recollection of dim shapes and fluttering garments huddling together for mutual protection from the wolfish blasts, while I clutched the rim of my hat with the clutch of desperation.

"But the view was superb."

Indeed, the 360-degree Hurricane summit viewscape takes in everything from the Green Mountains of Vermont, to Lake Champlain, to the High Peaks region in the heart of the Adirondacks.

So superb is the view from atop Hurricane that storied Adirondack surveyor Verplanck Colvin used the summit as a key observation

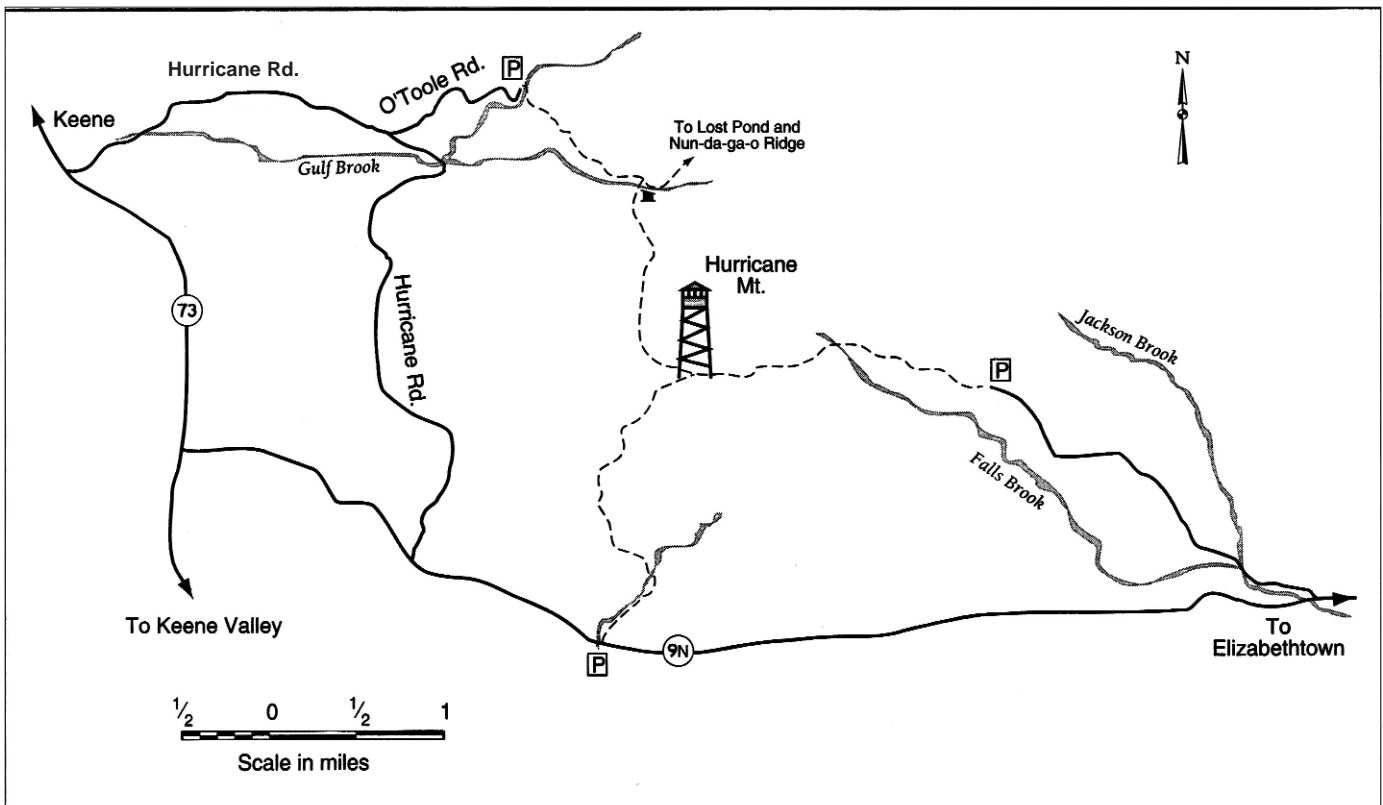
point in the late 1800s.

"If one looks down at the surface of the rock summit on the north side of the tower," wrote Paul Laskey in his book, "Fire Observation Towers of New York State," "they will see several old wrought-iron, hand-forged eye anchors Colvin used to anchor his wood-pole survey tower so strong winds would not blow it over."

Climbing Hurricane

Three trails lead to the summit of Hurricane Mountain, elevation 3,694 ft., according to the ADK's "Views From on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills."

The eastern trail (5.4 miles round trip) can be reached from the end of a dirt road that branches right off Route 9N 2.2 miles from the junction of routes 9N and 9 at the southern end of the village of



Map reproduced by permission from "Views From on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills," by John P. Freeman, published by the Adirondack Mountain Club

Elizabethtown. This trail is less used now than it once was, since the dirt road no longer goes through a stretch of private land to the former site of the fire observer's cabin.

To get to the northern trailhead, from Keene, drive 2.3 miles up Hurricane Road from the center of Keene hamlet. Bear left onto O'Toole Road where Hurricane makes a sharp right curve. Go up the dirt road 1.2 miles to a parking area at the Crow Clearing trailhead. The route from this trailhead is the longest of the three — 6 miles round trip — but ADK says it's the best one for snowshoeing because the grades are moderate throughout.

The most popular trailhead, especially in the summer, is on Route 9N at the height of land 3.6 miles east of the junction of routes 9N and 73 between Keene and Keene Valley, and 6.8 miles west of the junction of routes 9 and 9N at the southern end of the village of Elizabethtown. The parking area is on the south side of the road, opposite the trailhead. The round trip is 5.2 miles from this trailhead, and ADK calls it “a strenuous climb with steep sections for a fairly long distance.”

More information

- To get copies of the petition to save the Hurricane Mountain fire tower, or to sign up for the Friends of the Hurricane Fire Tower, contact Gretna Longware at 873-9272 (fax 2018) or Lew Egglefield at 873-6592.

- For more information on fire-tower preservation throughout the Adirondacks, contact Adirondack Architectural Heritage at 834-9328, or visit the organization's Web site at www.aarch.org.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY KEN HUBERT

Hurricane Mountain fire tower, as seen on Memorial Day weekend 2004.

- To get a copy of the fire-tower report from the Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks, call the RCPA at 251-4257 or visit the group's Web site at www.rcpa.org.

Books on fire towers

Two good books on Adirondack fire towers that include those in Essex County — Hurricane Mountain among them — have been published:

- “Views from on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills,” by John P. Freeman with Wesley H. Haynes (Lake George, NY: Adirondack Mountain Club, 2001). Paperback, 155 pages. SRP \$12.95. This book is essential equipment if you plan to visit any of the surviving fire towers, including Hurricane Mountain.

- “Fire Observation Towers of New York State: Survivors that Still Stand Guard,” by Paul Laskey (Ballston Spa, NY: MKL

Publishing, 2003). Paperback, 130 pages. SRP \$19.95.

Hurricane Mountain on the Web

You'll find several stories on the Web about Hurricane Mountain hiking experiences, along with some interesting photos:

- www.geocities.com/adkmike/trip_reports/ADK_20010923_Hurricane/ADK_20010923_Hurricane.htm

- www.summitpost.org/show/mountain_link.pl/mountain_id/451

- wandel.ca/homepage/adk_summitlog.html

- www.nyoutdoors.net/adk/hurricaneW.htm

On the Web you'll also find the chapter on the Hurricane Mountain fire tower from Paul Laskey's book, “The Fire Observation Towers of New York State: Survivors That Still Stand Guard.” That Web page's address is nysfire-towers.com/Hurricane_Mountain.htm