



# Mount Adams gets ready for the world

Words and pictures by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, October 7, 2005

NEWCOMB TWP. — The best southern view of the High Peaks has gotten a whole lot more accessible in the last year and a half — and none too soon, either.

After being held in private hands for a century and a half, the land around Mount Adams — known collectively as the Tahawus Tract — will soon be added to the state Forest Preserve, thanks to the Open Space Institute's purchase in 2003 of about 10,000 acres of mining and logging land from the National Lead company.

When OSI transfers ownership of the upper 6,000 acres of the Tahawus Tract to the state, a transaction expected to take place later this year or early next year, the trail to Mount Adams will be on public land, and the numbers of folks wanting to climb its fire tower are likely to increase.

Don't be afraid to climb Adams now, though; OSI has already granted the public access to most of the land scheduled for transfer to state ownership, including this trail.

The future of the fire tower on Mount Adams was once thought to be limited. When the mountain became part of the Forest Preserve,

it was assumed that the tower would have to come down, since man-made structures are considered "nonconforming" in state wilderness lands.

That was before OSI decided to hold on to the land immediately surrounding the fire tower, as well as that around the cabins at the base of the mountain once occupied by state fire watchers. Those two bits of land will be held out from the acreage to be passed to the state; thus, the "nonconforming structures" rule won't apply, since the tower and cabins will remain on private, not state, land.

I made my first ascent of Mount Adams in May 2004, when the future of the fire tower was an open question. I wanted to see the tower for myself, thinking that might help me get a sense of whether preserving the thing mattered.

At that time, it was very, very difficult to make one's way up the abandoned trail to Adams' summit — and downright risky to climb the rotting steps up the tower itself.

But once I arrived in the "cab" atop the steel-framed tower on that first climb last year, it was all worth it. There, laid out all around

me, was a truly spectacular, 360-degree view of some of New York's most beautiful backcountry. That view would simply not be possible without the fire tower; the Adirondack woods encroach so close to the Adams summit that, aside from climbing the tower, there's no way to see over the forest canopy.

**I PICKED** a nearly perfect day for my return trip up Mount Adams. It was late in September; the day was cool but not cold, and the skies were very clear — all in sharp contrast to the hot, hazy summer we've had to slog through this year.

One of the first hard frosts of the season had visited the region the night before my visit. As the rising sun warmed the trail, the brush alongside it became wet with the melting frost.

The first mile of the Mount Adams trail didn't need much improvement, being part of the Hanging Spear Falls trail to the Flowed Lands and Mount Allen.

AT TOP, a makeshift bridge crosses a narrow inlet of Lake Jimmy on the Mount Adams trail.

From the trailhead parking lot, it wends alongside the Hudson River for a short while, crossing over on an iron bridge suspended by cables across the water.

After another half-mile or so, the trail crosses a shallow inlet of Lake Jimmy on a primitive bridge. The “bridge” is actually more like a path made from planks nailed over several tree trunks sunk on the bottom of the lake.

From the far side of the Lake Jimmy inlet, the trail climbs very gently until it reaches a pair of cabins in a clearing. These were the home of the state fire observer who manned the tower atop Mount Adams for six months out of each year, from 1912 until 1972.

The rougher of the two cabins was used for storage.

The more finished cabin, however, is on its way to becoming a historic landmark. Built in 1922, it is the only surviving example of the standardized, mass-produced cabins built by the state for its fire observers all across the Adirondack and Catskill parks. A tree has fallen across an addition built onto the back of the cabin in the 1950s — but, remarkably, the 1922 cabin itself was spared.

“If you put your back to it and push it as hard as you can, it still doesn’t budge,” said Joanna Donk, remarking on the cabin’s surprisingly sound condition.

Donk is a member of the Friends of Mount Adams, a local volunteer group that has pledged to restore and maintain the 1922 cabin and the fire tower, which were nominated by a state review board last month for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

**THE SECOND** part of the trail, which starts when you leave the observer’s cabins, is where the improvements made over the last



The Model 1922 fire observer’s cabin at the base of Mount Adams.

two summers really count. Most of the 1,800-foot elevation gain on this hike is acquired in the last 1.4 miles of this 2.4-mile trail. The trail improvements have made what once was an ordeal into an ordinary — albeit strenuous — hike.

I found the first indication of the trail’s improvements just a hundred yards or so past the cabins. A wooden sign with an arrow, mounted there on a post, now points to the left up the Mount Adams trail. Before, there were only cairns left by previous hikers to mark that

turn. You couldn’t count on the cairns always being there, and without them, it was difficult — if not impossible — to make this crucial turn.

I found my second indication of the Adams trail’s improvement quickly as I started climbing upward: Circular DEC “Foot Trail” markers, their paint still bright and new, were nailed to trees every so often along the way, marking the path.

Before, you could have found old trail markers still nailed to trees, here and there, but their paint

would have been faded and chipped, and they would have been rare and difficult to see.

My third indication of how much improved the trail up Adams had become was more subtle than the presence of fresh markers, and it took me a quarter-mile or so before I picked up on it.

On my first climb, I found the old, abandoned trail very difficult to follow. Adams hikers had to keep their eyes wide open every second, watching for whatever indications they could find of the old trail still lingering beneath the thick cover of scrub brush.

The Adams trail was a real mess, one of the reasons the Adirondack Mountain Club rated this trail one of the three most difficult (along with Gore and Hunter) among New York's fire tower trails. The DEC had abandoned the trail because they assumed that the Adams fire tower would eventually be dismantled — and, without the fire tower, there was very little reason to climb Adams.

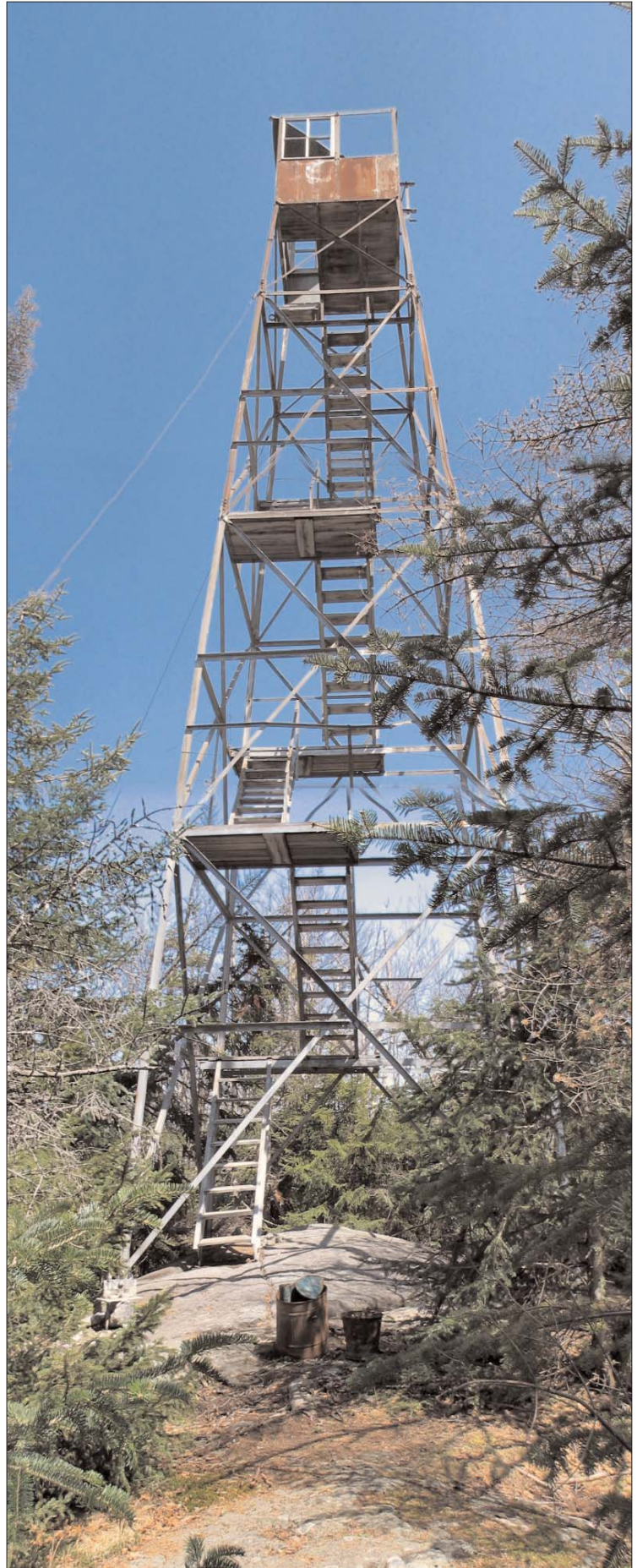
During the summer of 2004, after OSI had decided to save the tower on Mount Adams, the DEC rounded up a young AmeriCorps crew to brush out the trail and cut away the tons of blowdown deposited by years of mountain storms on the upper slopes.

Now, thanks to those volunteers, there is no mistaking the trail up Mount Adams — but it hasn't yet become one of those heavily engineered wilderness sidewalks through tamed woodland parks that you find on many of our mountains. This trail, despite the red trail markers, still has the feel of a real wilderland path.

**WHEN YOU** get to about 2,500 feet, the trail briefly becomes indistinguishable from a mountain brook. Water gently flows over the steep, bare rock, its music serenading you as you carefully, steadily mount upward.

According to Donk, who first climbed Adams some years ago, a wooden ladder once assisted climbers up this portion of the trail. Today, that ladder is gone, but you'll still come across a few of the nails that used to hold it in place, sticking out in odd places along the trail.

At this point, you'll be especially grateful for equipping yourself with two essential items.



AT RIGHT, the Mount Adams fire tower, photographed in May 2004, looking much the same from this perspective as it does today.



A close shot up the interior of the fire tower's steel frame, featuring the new steps and platforms

One is a pair of good, solid, lug-soled hiking boots — and by that, I definitely do *not* mean a pair of cheap shoes from Wal-Mart designed to *look* like hiking boots.

The other essential piece of equipment is a good, stout walking stick. You'll need the stick to balance your way up the rocky creek bed the trail becomes for a short while.

**AS IS THE** case with other fire-tower mountains, you won't see any indication of the Adams tower's presence until you're almost upon it, rising 47 feet from the small patch of bare rock that constitutes this mountain's summit.

Upon first examination, it was difficult for me to see much difference in the tower from the condition in which I first found it in May 2004. The steel framework of the tower itself, built in 1917, is still as sturdy as ever — and the cab, once painted bright red, still looks as raggedy on its perch as it did last year, half its roof blown off and most of its windows busted out by rain, wind and vandals.

The big improvement on the tower is in the steps and platforms of the wooden staircase that climbs to the cab. The AmeriCorps crew started replacing the old, rotting wood last summer; DEC staff and volunteers completed the project this year.

No sooner was the work finished, evidently, than visitors began marking their presence with fresh graffiti on the underside of the tower's lowest platform; the earliest is dated August 2005.

Though a sign attached to the first flight of stairs warns, "Tower Not Open to the Public," this is no longer the hazardous climb it was when I first summited Adams early last year. In fact, as if to reassure potential climbers, someone has written on the back of the "Not



Open” sign their own humorous re-rendering:

“Tower open to the public Monday through Friday, 8 to 6; weekends by appointment.”

**GETTING THERE** — To get to the Mount Adams trailhead, you will drive from Lake Placid on state Route 73 through Keene and Keene Valley to Northway (I-87) Exit 30, then jog south to Exit 29 (North Hudson).

From Exit 29, it’s a 17.5-mile drive on the Boreas/Blue Ridge Road, heading toward Newcomb, before you reach county Route 25 (Tahawus Rd.), where you will turn right.

Zero your trip meter as you make that turn, then watch the

mileage so you don’t lose your way.

You’ll pass the Lower Works Road on the right at 0.4 miles (Route 25 curves left). The “Lower Works” is the current home of the private Tahawus Club.

At 6.3 miles, county Route 25 branches off to the left toward the Mount Adams trailhead, the New Furnace and the ghost town named Adirondac. Make sure you make that left turn; don’t keep going straight onto county Route 76, or you’ll end up at the gate to the abandoned National Lead mill works.

The “New Furnace,” an 1854 blast furnace that looks like a small Mayan pyramid that somehow got lost in the North Country woods,

rises on the right side of the road at 9.1 miles.

The Mount Adams trailhead parking lot is on the right at 9.3 miles.

The MacNaughton Cottage, the only building still standing from the Adirondac iron-mining days (1830s through 1850s), is a two-story frame house on the right at the beginning of the ghost village, at 9.7 miles.

At the end of Route 25 is the parking lot for the southern trailhead to the High Peaks, at 9.9 miles.

AT TOP, a view from the south of the High Peaks through two of the restored cab windows in the Mount Adams fire tower.