

Palmer Hill & Belfry Mountain

Two short fire-tower trips

Words & pictures by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, February 3, 2006

Essex County has an extraordinarily wide range of fire towers that enthusiasts can visit.

Several provide the best views you can get from the south of the central High Peaks: Vanderwhacker in Minerva township, and Newcomb's Goodnow and Adams.

In central Essex County, two towers offer hikers a hard bargain: tough climbs in exchange for great views. One of those towers is on Poke-O-Moonshine, south of Keeseville, in Chesterfield township. The other is the embattled Hurricane Mountain tower, standing on the town border between Keene and Elizabethtown.

But Essex County also has two more of these old Adirondack sentinels still standing. Neither of them attract anything like the attention brought by the others. They rise from relatively low prominences. The "hikes" to visit them — they should

really be called "strolls" — run up graded dirt maintenance roads.

One of them is the tower atop Belfry Mountain, outside the hamlet of Witherbee, in Moriah township.

The other is the Palmer Hill fire tower, outside Au Sable Forks.

Palmer Hill

The Palmer Hill fire tower (elevation 1,146 feet) is not really in Essex County at all, but its Essex ties are strong.

For one, its host community is Au Sable Forks, which straddles the Au Sable River and the Clinton-Essex county line, equally a part of both counties.

For another, the Palmer Hill fire tower was built as a backup for the tower on Whiteface Mountain, in Essex County.

The area to the north and east of Whiteface is very dry, getting less

rainfall each year than anywhere else in New York state. Fire observers needed to keep a lookout there in the early spring and late autumn, but the snows on Whiteface summit prevented the manning of that station between October and March. The tower on Palmer Hill, opened in 1930, was first manned by Whiteface observers.

The tower was closed in 1974, when aerial fire spotters first began displacing observers on the ground, but was re-opened in 1978 and continued operating through 1988.

Today, the Palmer Hill fire tower is in private hands. The owner leases space on its supports to National Grid, the successor company to Niagara Mohawk, for radio antennae.

Visiting Palmer Hill

To visit Palmer Hill from Lake Placid, take Route 86 through



Restoration: Three images from a trip taken in the summer of 2004 show the Palmer Hill fire tower's appearance after the phone lines and antennae are "photoshopped" away, leaving the tower looking much as it did when fire observers of yore kept watch over the Adirondack Forest Preserve from the tower's cab.

Wilmington to Jay. Turn left at the Jay Green onto Route 9N, which runs along the East Branch of the Au Sable River into Au Sable Forks. Cross the unincorporated village's Main Street bridge and continue straight through the caution light at the Stewart's Shops store. At the next corner, turn left toward Black Brook and Union Falls.

Go past a cemetery on the left to a fork in the road, where you will bear right toward Palmer Hill and Harkness. After half a mile you will see the street sign for Tower Road, where you'll turn left.

At 0.9 miles, Tower Road itself curves left — but to the right, you will see a metal gate. Park your car there and head up the maintenance road to the top, a jaunt of about an eighth of a mile.

At the summit you'll find a clearing. Off to one side is the old fire tower, a metal sheath screening the lower three flights of stairs and preventing anyone from climbing to the top.

If you look to the left, just before entering the clearing, you will see two "No Trespassing" signs nailed to a tree — and for good reason.

In the Seventies, when the Palmer Hill fire tower was closed for 4 years, this site was heavily vandalized. The observer's cabin, which once stood at the foot of the tower, had to be carted off by the DEC in the mid-1970s to prevent it from being completely destroyed.

And since the fire tower's final closure in 1988, the somewhat remote clearing has served as the site of many an underaged drinking party, complete with dangerous bonfires.

If you visit Palmer Hill, please abide by the owner's wishes: Observe, but *stay away from the tower* itself.

The view from the top of Palmer Hill — particularly without access to the cab atop the tower — is not that

great. The tall pines that have grown up around the summit impair what might otherwise be a great vista looking west-southwest toward Whiteface and Esther mountains.

For many, however, even without being able to climb the tower, the trip up Palmer Hill is worth the short walk, just to pay homage to another one of the surviving old guardians of the Adirondack forest.

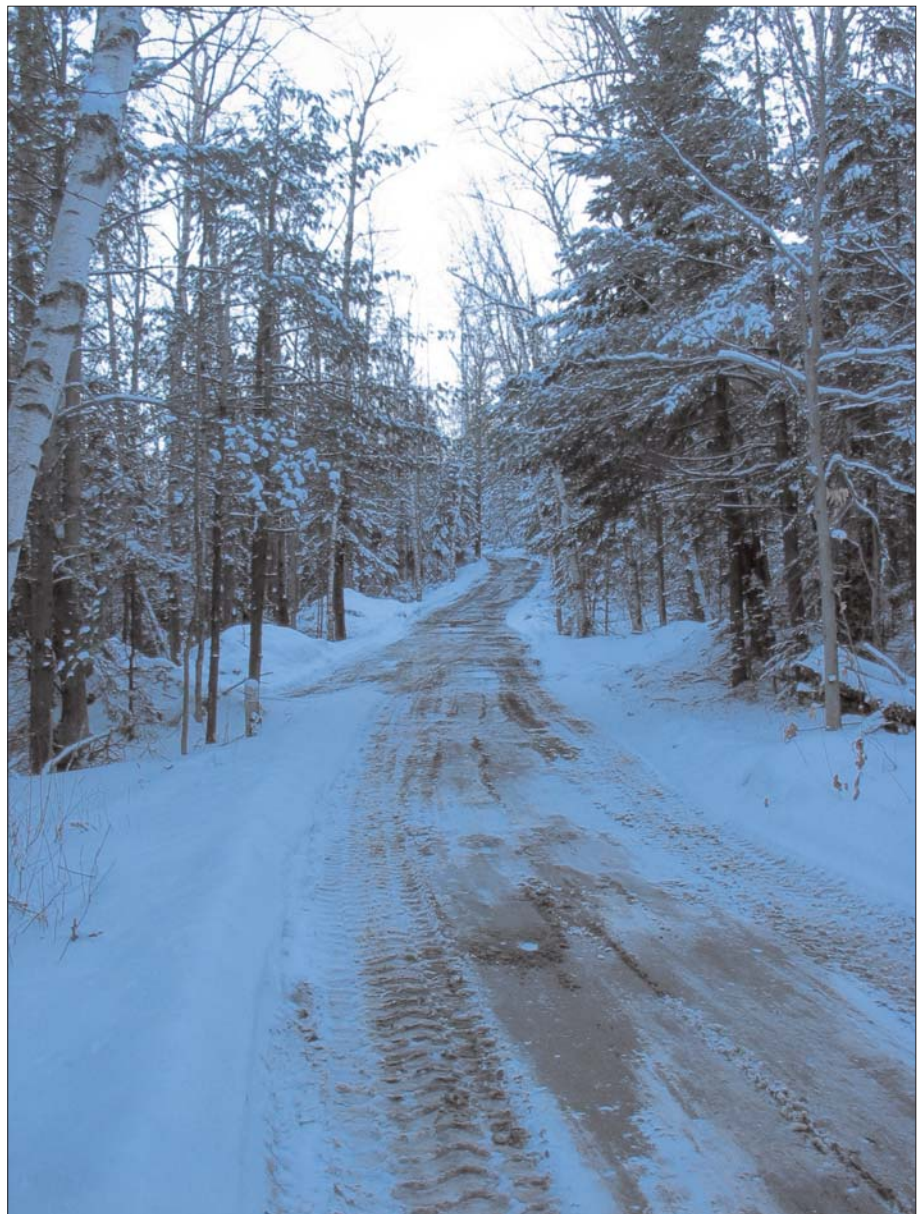
Belfry Mountain

The view from Belfry, on the other hand, is truly amazing — perhaps

more so because the effort required to summit this little mountain (elevation 1,863 feet) is so minimal.

Because the walk up the Belfry Mountain access road is so short and so easy, this is a great spot from which to get a panoramic winter view of the High Peaks, especially for those who are not prepared to hike deep into the Great Range in the depth of winter — all of this assuming, of course, that winter ever returns this year.

The state first stationed a fire observer atop Belfry in 1912. The



The "trail" to the Belfry Mountain fire tower is a maintenance road, and not a very pretty one at that — but it is plowed and sanded, making for safe climbing.

summit, which had been clear cut, was a pasture; no tower was needed to scan 360 degrees around the mountain. The 47-foot steel tower and cab found there today were not built until 1917, and then mostly to give the fire observer protection from the elements.

The Belfry Mountain fire observation station was closed in 1988. Essex County now uses the tower as a platform for radio antennae.

An early cabin for the Belfry fire observers was built at the mountain's foot in 1934. Later, another one was built higher up, at the base of the tower. According to one account, that cabin was still there in 1992, sans

door and windows; another story says that it was taken down sometime in the mid-1980s to ensure that it didn't fall down on someone. In any case, all you'll find today on the summit near the tower are the cabin's foundations.

When you climb Belfry's small tower, the first thing you'll see to the east is the hamlet of Witherbee and, nearby, several huge cones of debris. These are tailings piles, left over from the days when the Witherbee Sherman Mining Company (and, later, Republic Steel) operated a huge network of iron mines in Moriah township. The mines were still being worked as late as the 1970s.

(On your way back to Lake Placid, notice the tenements on either side of Witherbee Road. Built by Witherbee Sherman as housing for its workers, they were constructed with concrete blocks made using Moriah iron tailings, incredibly dense and very durable.)

Beyond Witherbee, the view from the Belfry tower reaches eastward to the Green Mountains of Vermont. To the northwest, you'll see Hurricane Mountain and, farther off, Whiteface. To the west is Rocky Ridge and Giant; to the southwest, Dix and the Great Range; and to the south-southwest, Pharaoh Mountain in Schroon township.



LEFT, the fire tower on Palmer Hill. RIGHT, the tower on Belfry Mountain.



Visiting Belfry Mountain

To reach Belfry Mountain from Lake Placid, head down Route 73 through Keene and Keene Valley. Immediately after you pass under the Northway, take the first left onto Tracy Road (Route 6). After driving 7.7 miles, you will reach the stop sign at Witherbee Road (Route 70) on the edge of Witherbee hamlet. Turn left and go just 1 more mile, where you will see a DEC trail marker on the left for the Hammond Pond Wild Forest; parking is on the right (opposite) side of the road.

As the trail marker indicates, the climb to the Belfry Mountain fire tower is just 0.4 miles. Except for the last hundred feet or so, the path goes entirely up a graded, plowed maintenance road.

The tower is the property of the town of Moriah, so don't worry about trespassing. The tower's structure is sound, the stairs are solid, and the cab is open — so climb away!

More info

If you would like to learn more about Moriah's historic iron works, try visiting the Iron Center museum in Port Henry, open from mid-June through mid-October, or take a walking tour of Port Henry, which serves as the "capital" of Moriah township. You'll find more information about Port Henry, Moriah's mines and the Iron Center at www.porthenry.com.

There are three books that serve

as good resources for information on New York's fire towers:

- The best fire-tower trail guide is the ADK's "Views from on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills," by John P. Freeman (2001).

- A good survey of all the standing fire towers throughout the state is Paul Laskey's "The Fire Observation Towers of New York State" (2003).

- The most comprehensive collection of oral histories from fire observers and rangers is Marty Podskoch's three-volume series, the final installment of which is "Adirondack Fire Towers, Their History and Lore: The Northern

Districts" (2005).

The Adirondack Architectural Heritage Web site (aarch.org) has information on fire towers from a preservationist point of view.

One more resource worth mentioning is a report titled "The Future of Adirondack Fire Towers," issued at the end of 2004 by the environmentalist Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks. The report is available *free* on the Web as a PDF download from www.rcpa.org.

TOP, panoramic view looking westward from the fire tower cab on Belfry. BELOW, view from the cab looking east over the hamlet of Witherbee and Lake Champlain.

