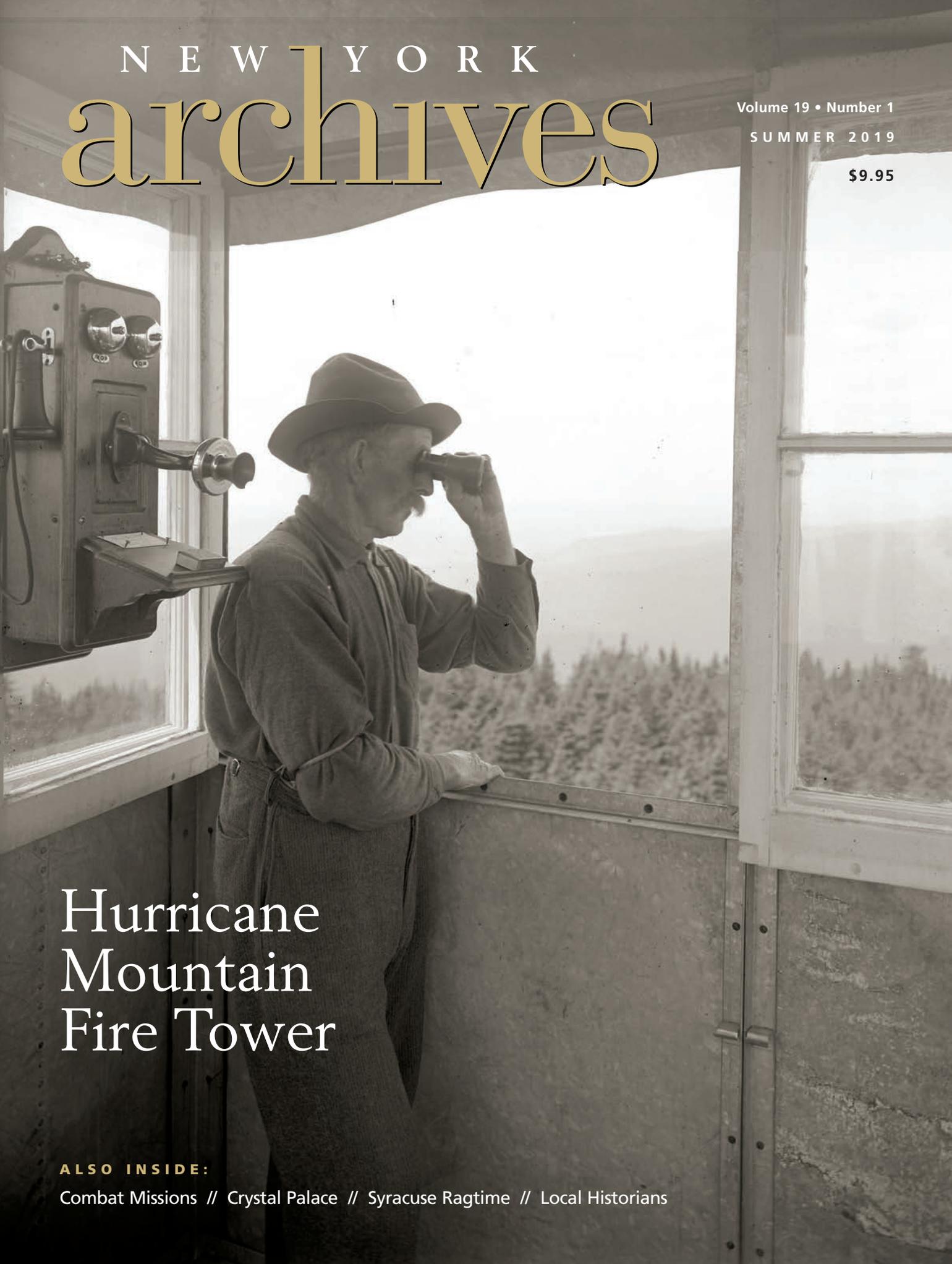


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Hurricane  
Mountain  
Fire Tower

**ALSO INSIDE:**

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— VIEW FROM →  
HURRICANE MTN.



(ascent 2000')

MILES  
2.6

BY PETER SLOCUM

## Festivities are planned to celebrate a local landmark, a monument to a fire tower's heyday.

**M**ilo Bronson's 1919 summer job was to spot fires from the top of Hurricane Mountain on the eastern edge of the Adirondack High Peaks. But what happened one August day a century ago was a fire observer's worst nightmare—he spotted his own house on fire. He raced a mile and a half down the steep, boulder-strewn trail only to find his home destroyed. His wife and family were safe, but the house, shed, and livestock were gone.

Bronson's bad luck came nine years into New York's experiment with mountain top fire observation. Fortunately,

the overall experience was a raging success, a statewide initiative that played a major role in protecting and preserving the largest park in the nation outside of Alaska.

This summer, the Adirondack History Center in Elizabethtown will host a special exhibit on the Hurricane Fire Tower's 100th Anniversary with photographs, historic documents, log books, and oral histories. Commemorative hikes are also planned for August 10 and 11. The celebration honors the history and changing role of the fire tower over its years standing in the Adirondack Park.

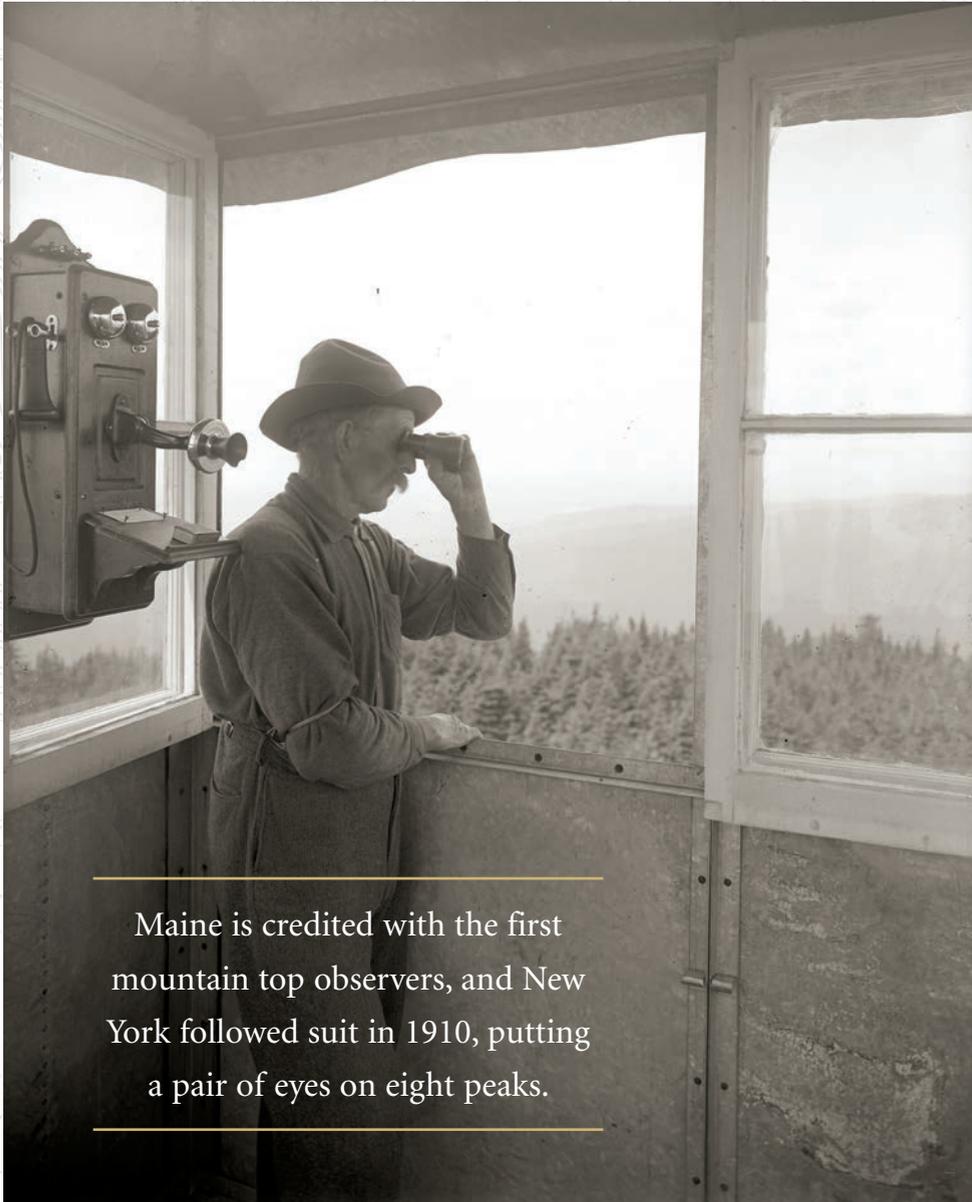
### Fire Danger

In the very beginning of the twentieth century, the future of the Adirondack Park did not look so good. Huge fires roared through the wilderness in 1903 and again in 1908, burning more than 800,000 acres (an area larger than Yosemite National Park) and coming within a few miles of Keene Valley and other villages. Conditions were unusually dry those years, and widespread lumbering was increasing the fire danger dramatically. Critically, the state had no early detection system at all.

Maine is credited with the first mountain top observers, and New York followed suit in

*Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower is celebrating its centennial.*

COURTESY OF MARY JEAN BLAND



Maine is credited with the first mountain top observers, and New York followed suit in 1910, putting a pair of eyes on eight peaks.

1910, putting a pair of eyes on eight peaks. Four years later, there were observers on forty-nine peaks and the plan was making a difference. The New York State Conservation Commission observed, "If we compare the three years of great drought, namely, 1903,

1908 and 1913, the efficiency of the present system is immediately seen. ... The area burned in 1903 was 464,189 acres; in 1908, 368,072; and in 1913, 54,768 acres." The average acreage consumed per fire dropped from 608 acres in 1908 to 79 acres in

1913. Hurricane, in the Town of Keene, played a significant part; its observers reported a total of forty-three fires in 1914, the most in the Adirondacks.

As a prominent peak, Hurricane has a long role in New York history. The legendary state surveyor Verplanck Colvin climbed the mountain with his crew on July 21, 1873, achieving a key vantage point for his project to map and measure all of the Adirondacks. His men built a wooden tower on top, and used it as a sighting station to line up precision measurements from the shore of Lake Champlain into Mt. Marcy, Whiteface, and other peaks. The iron rings that Colvin's men drove into the rock to anchor his tower to Hurricane's rocky summit are still visible, just north of the fire tower.

Building on its initial success, New York decided to enhance the early warning network by erecting towers even on bald, rocky peaks like Hurricane and Whiteface mountains. These towers improved the view—on wooded summits they provided the only view—and they also provided protection for the observers, who otherwise tried to shelter themselves in wind-torn canvas tents or behind rocks and ledges. Any modern day hiker who has spent an hour on top of Hurricane or Whiteface knows the price to be paid.

Turning midwestern windmills into forestry sentinels, New York bought dozens of

steel towers, most from Chicago's Aeromotor Windmill Company, and put seven-foot square cabs on top. With a roof and windows, a round map table with sighting device, and a phone line, the observers were able to spot and report fires across the region. According to the September 12, 1919, edition of the *Lake Placid News* the Hurricane Mountain construction project was quite involved. The steel components were "transferred to wagon teams and carried then to within three miles of the top, then by jumper (horse cart) to about one mile of the summit; then, by skidding, pack saddles and man power to the top, within twenty feet of that point where the tower will stand.

"The last mile of this way involved the building of a new trail through an old fire slash up to the last ledge, and then on a shelf of the ledge, about five feet wide." The project took nine days, "including two days when operations were at a standstill owing to the necessity of fighting a forest fire. The trail that was cut with much labor and difficulty made it possible for the first time for horses to reach the top." Parts of the tower, "which could not be handled otherwise, toward the finish, had to be carried a long distance on the backs of the men."

These crews developed quite an expertise at assembling towers, and travelled from peak to peak, completing each job in less than two weeks. Eventually, New York

had 110 steel towers all over the state, even on Long Island. Most were in the Adirondacks. (There were another seventeen non-steel tower observation posts in New York.)

#### **Educators and Ambassadors**

In the Adirondack Park, as lumbering declined and public access to the Adirondacks increased, those observers sitting up in the towers began to be more educators and ambassadors than fire spotters. Conscious of this new public

role, the state required observers to wear uniforms starting in 1926 and to fly the American flag atop the tower.

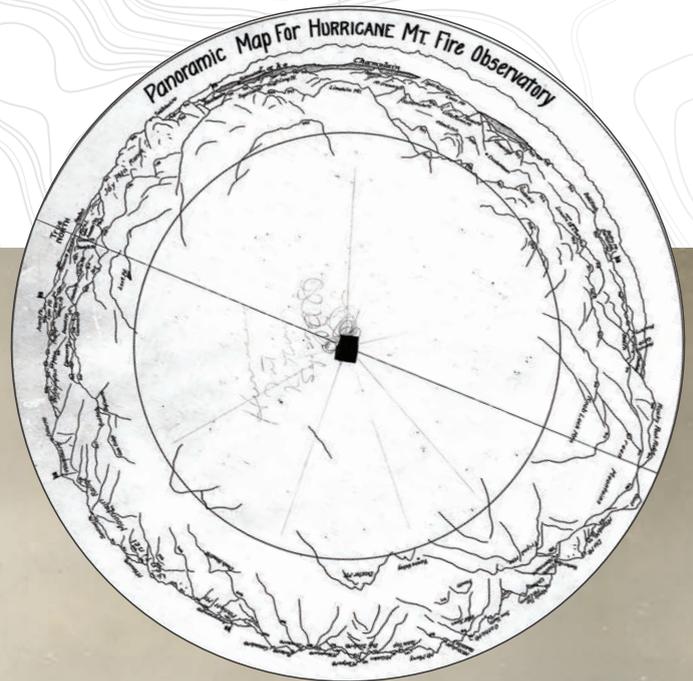
The Conservation Commission began compiling the number of visitors to each tower, as well as the numbers of fires spotted. Improving hiking trails became a part of the job, and the role of the towers transitioned. Public education became paramount. At the same time, fire spotting from airplanes became more cost effective, first in

*As seen here in a photo of the construction of the Adams Mountain fire tower in 1917, trails were cut to allow horses to reach the summit carrying steel components.*

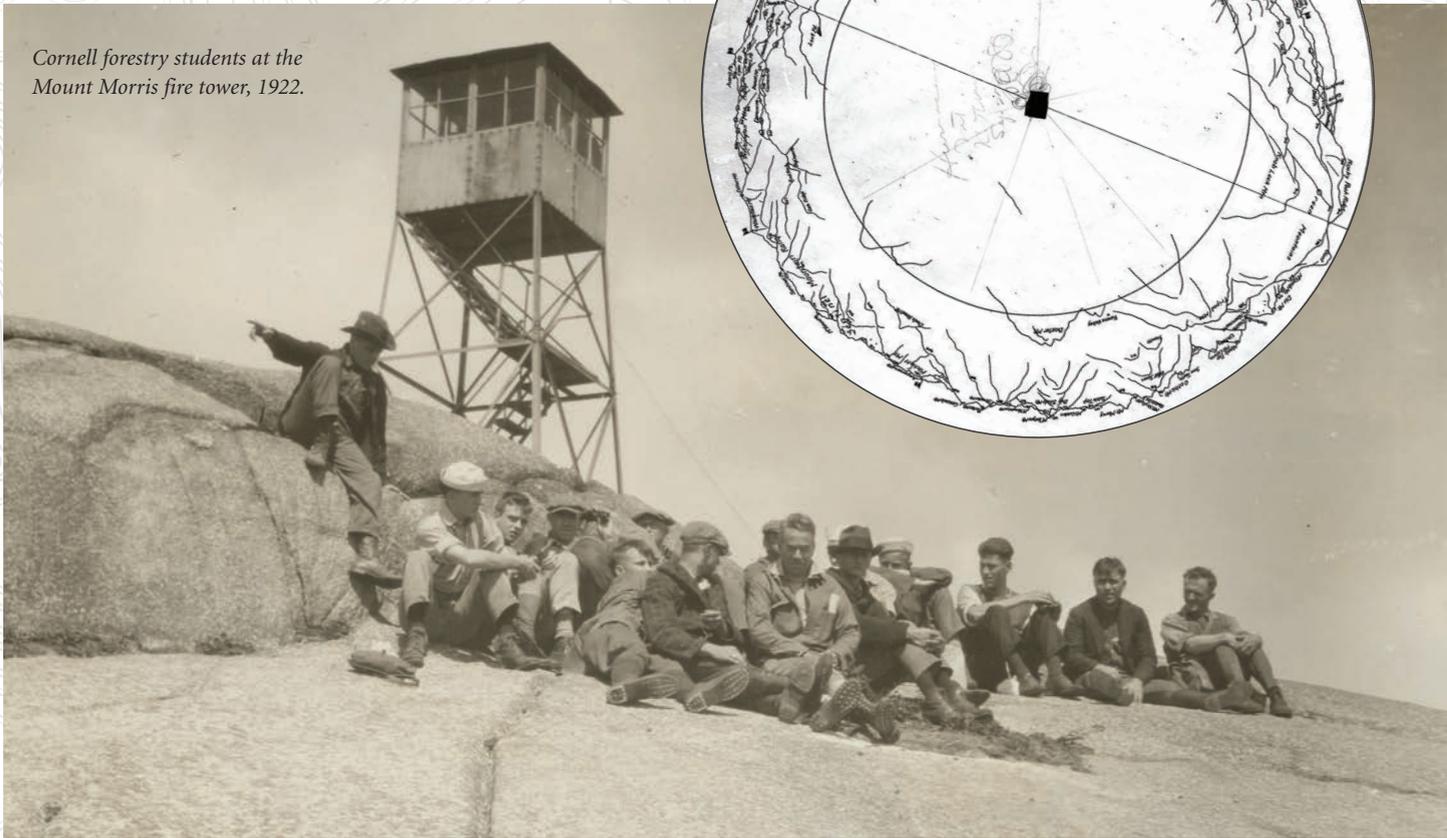


COURTESY OF NYS DEC

Inset: A panoramic map of Hurricane Mountain fire observatory, ca. 1920.  
NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES



Cornell forestry students at the Mount Morris fire tower, 1922.



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state-owned planes and then with private contractors, leading to a decline in the use of the towers.

Finally, on September 27, 1979, Ranger Richard Olcott, along with several other State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) officials, signed the official log book at Hurricane Mountain tower this way: "Closed tower forever!!!"

For a while, that seemed to be true. All the state's fire towers were mothballed in place. The bottom two flights of stairs were stripped off Hurricane's tower to keep people from climbing up the 35-foot tall structure.

As the national and worldwide environmental movement that grew out of the 1960s led to a big increase in hikers, canoeists, and others who embraced the wonders of the Adirondacks, it also gave birth to the DEC and a new set of land use rules for public and private lands in the Forest Preserve under the auspices of the Adirondack Park Agency. The new land classification system sought to return many areas to wilderness. Lean-tos above 3,500 feet were removed, tree-cutting forbidden, campfires were banned in many areas, size limits imposed on camping and hiking groups. Fire

towers were "non-conforming structures," and many were removed.

#### Local Landmark

But when it came to Hurricane, and a number of other towers, many local people had a competing view. The Hurricane tower was a landmark, an important part of the local landscape, a beacon welcoming them home. "Our Statue of Liberty," one woman called it.

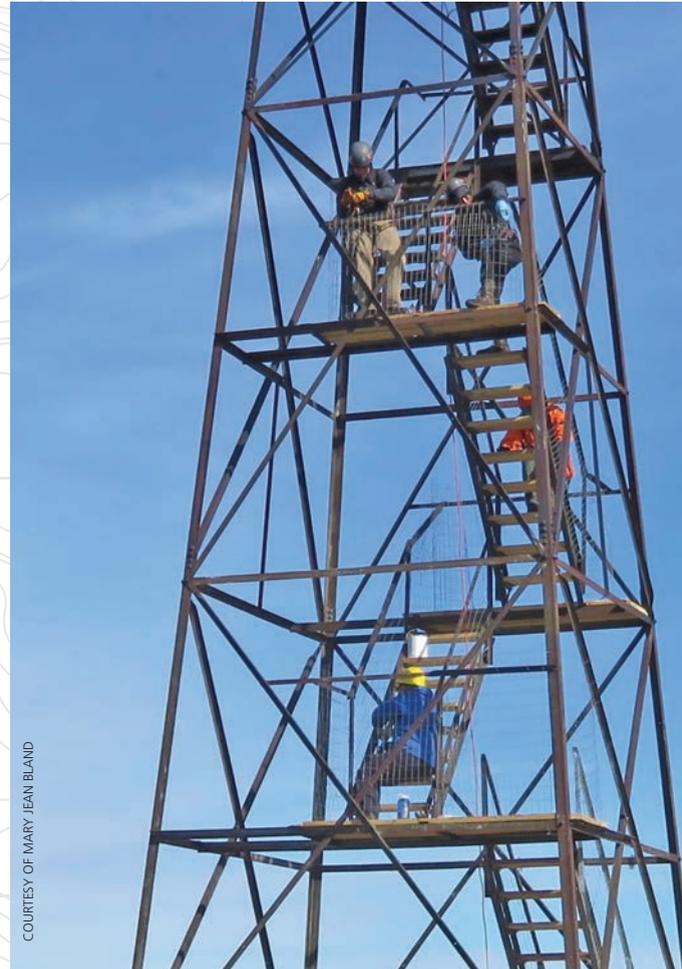
A drawn-out struggle ensued: Adirondackers who saw the tower as part of their history were the underdogs against state government, which embraced the idea of wilderness. Gretna and Melvin

Longware, of Elizabethtown, led the local campaign to save the Hurricane tower. They circulated petitions, and called on friends in the community, school children in the region, local governments, and businesses.

Here are excerpts from two letters: "My late son Thomas, a camper at Dudley, and later a frequent visitor to the Adirondacks, climbed Hurricane Mountain just before he died. Please, do not let DEC tear this valuable landmark down. Thomas, who was a NYC firefighter, is certainly looking down on your efforts and adding moral support."

"Why do you want to take down the Hurricane Fire Tower?" wrote one school boy from Keene in 2004. "It's an historical landmark. I would really like to take my friends up to see it. It would be nice if you could fix it, too."

All the local towns passed resolutions urging the tower be saved, and so did the Essex County Legislature. With a major assist from the Adirondack Architectural Heritage Association, which helped get the tower listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the state was ultimately persuaded to change course. The tower could stay, in a half-acre square Historic District carved out of the wilderness zone, and the state would enlist volunteers to help repair and maintain the tower. This was the same plan adopted for the Mt. Adams and St. Regis



COURTESY OF MARY JEAN BLAND

fire towers, erected in 1917 and 1918, respectively.

### **Tower Challenge**

The Glens Falls chapter of the Adirondack Mountain Club helped popularize the old structures, promoting a Fire Tower Climbing challenge that encouraged hikers to climb as many towers as possible, a version of the extraordinarily popular challenge to climb all 46 peaks over 4,000 feet.

Restoration began in 2015. A Student Conservation Association crew was hired to

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replace the wooden stairway treads and landings, install protective fencing, and formally reopen the tower for hikers to enjoy. A newly formed Friends of Hurricane Mountain volunteer group contracted with the state to maintain the tower and the three trails to the summit, install interpretive signs about the tower's history, and educate hikers about the never-ending struggle to protect the forest preserve. An overt purpose for preserving the tower, and others like it, is this educational mission.



COURTESY OF MARY JEAN BLAND

As the Hurricane Fire Tower ages into its second century, it has a role in protecting the Adirondack forests in a new way.

For classroom activities related to this article, see our Educator Guide at [www.nysarchivestrust.org/education/educator-guide-new-york-archives-magazine](http://www.nysarchivestrust.org/education/educator-guide-new-york-archives-magazine)

The state provides funds to hire a summit steward for the summer months to help hikers understand the fragility of the wilderness they see around them.

Volunteers painted the tower in 2017 and are planning to help install a new roof in time for the September 2019 centennial.

In an ironic twist, the very popularity of the 2.5 million acre forest preserve now threatens its special nature. Hordes of hikers, concentrated in certain popular areas, including fire tower peaks like Hurricane, are the prime reason that more back country educators are needed to inspire hikers to "Leave No Trace." Summit stewards in 2018 reported hikers trampling

on sensitive alpine plants, defacing the tower with graffiti, eroding trails, cutting live trees, and even found human feces right in the middle of the trail to Hurricane. As Ranger John Olcott, who oversaw Hurricane Mountain Fire Tower from 1920-1950, put it in a 2019 interview, "What they call wilderness, well, they might just as well be down on 42nd Street, with the soil all gone, stream beds hollowed out. That's not wilderness."

This spring, *Outside Magazine* named Hurricane the "Best Hike in New York," an accolade that will come with costs. As the Hurricane Fire Tower ages into its second century, it has a role in protecting the Adirondack forests in a new way. ■

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

The New York State Archives holds a collection of more than 5,000 glass plate negatives from the DEC and its predecessor agencies. Among many other images from the forest preserves in the Adirondacks and the Catskills are maps used in the fire towers. Archives staff made a high-resolution copy of the original hand-drawn panorama map used in the Hurricane Fire Tower, which the Friends of Hurricane Mountain plans to use to recreate a fire-spotting map for hikers to enjoy in the newly restored observer cab. The Keene Valley Library Archives, Town of Keene Historical Society, and the Adirondack Experience Museum all have photographs, family histories, and local reports, relating to fire towers and Hurricane Mountain. The Adirondack Research Center at the Saranac Lake Public Library has official government reports, photographs, memoirs, and manuscripts about the forest preserve. Adirondack Architectural Heritage also offered its collection of records and photos.

The Adirondack History Center in Elizabethtown, which enjoys a view of the Hurricane Fire Tower from its upstairs windows, maintains a historic collection of Hurricane Fire Tower log books dating to 1915.