

Alabama's Lookout Tower Legacy

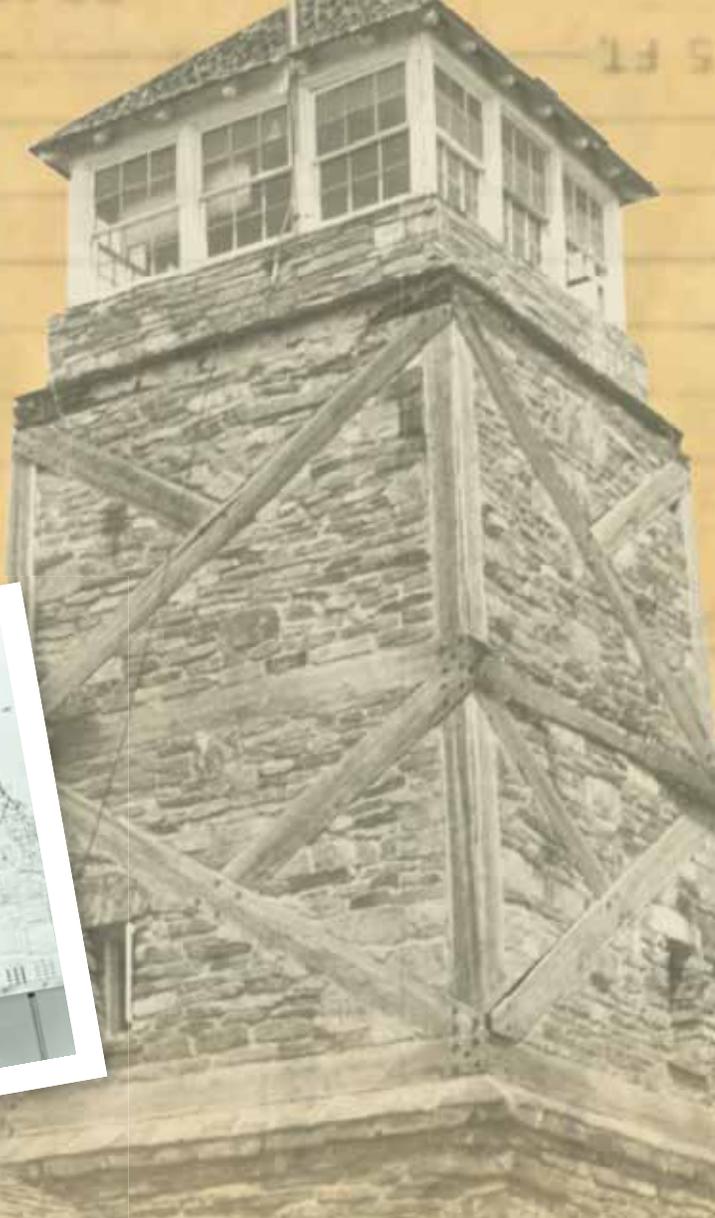
Why Our State's Firetowers Are So Important
and Why They Deserve To Be Preserved

By Thomas Kaufmann,
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I am always awestruck when I see them . . . those magnificent steel structures which rise from the forest floor to the level of command over the mountain, plain, and valley range – marvelous examples of American engineering at its best. From deeply anchored concrete piers, the soaring diagonally-braced steel frame – crowned with an 'Arts & Crafts-inspired' observation cab – pierces the airspace above the forest skyline. More than just a rusty steel frame armature, they are the only major historical link to our state's fire protection past – they are Alabama's lookout towers.

Just one look and you can feel the quality of engineering, craftsmanship, and excellence. For the better part of the past century, they served well in protecting our state from the threat of flame. Archival records list nearly 190 in total number (including US Forest Service lookouts) during the apex of lookout tower history. However, now there are only around half as many still standing, and due to present

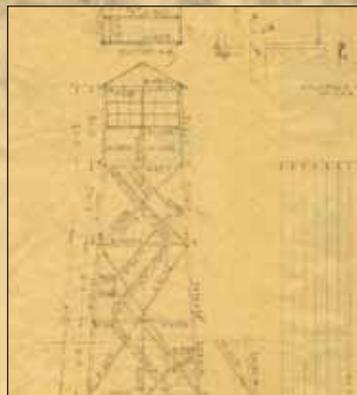
Elevated at 1,189 feet, the view from Flagg Mountain Tower in Coosa County allowed Forest Fire Lookout Kate Prater and Forest Ranger L. D. Roberts to see across seven counties on a clear day.
 (Photos courtesy of AFC)



Blackjack Tower, Clay County
 (Courtesy of AFC)

issues and circumstances, that number could diminish even more over time.

As excellent examples of ‘triangulation,’ these structures are vector-force-resistance diagrams which came to life straight from the engineering textbook. The structural designer surely had the forces of nature in mind during their conception, as practically all of Alabama’s lookouts have withstood the fierce tempest winds of hurricanes, thunderstorms, and tornados. And they are still



Aermotor LS-40 blueprint
 (Courtesy of Dave Quam, FFLA Minnesota)

standing strong even now, despite a general rusty appearance among the greater number. These artifacts are the only Forest Service icons left from a great generation, and once they are gone – that’s it . . . there will be nothing left to serve as memory of this classic era of Forest Service history in Alabama.

Early Alabama lookouts were primitive at best, sometimes taking the form of a

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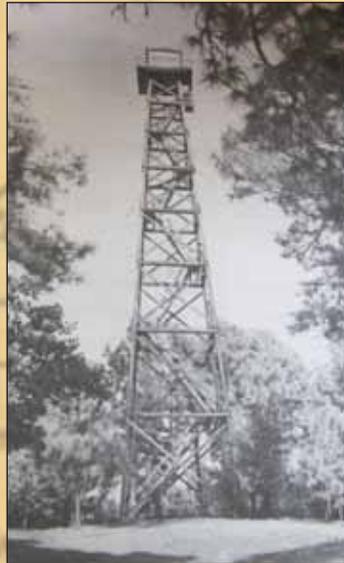
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Wooden pole lookout

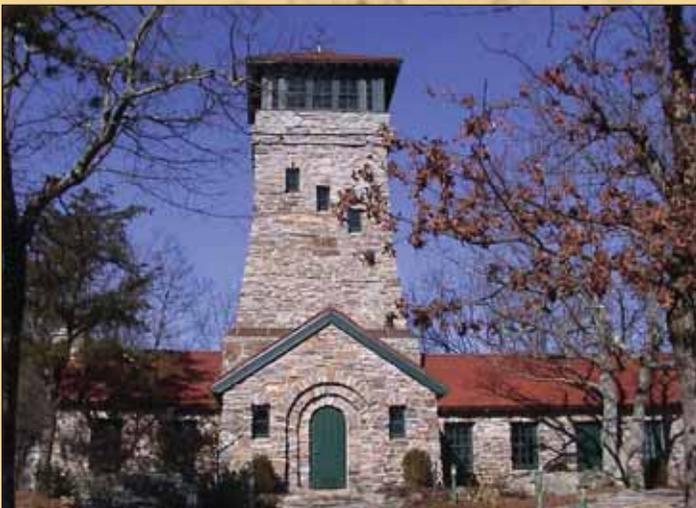
(Photo by J.M. Stauffer, July 1942, Alabama Conservation News)



Mulga Lookout Tower, Jefferson County

(from Alabama Department of Conservation - Division of Forestry Annual Report 1947-1948)

tree-stand or a wooden pole. Before 1933, all or nearly all of the forest observation towers in Alabama were wooden structures that later steel towers closely modeled. For certain, the original steel tower designers wanted very much to emulate the look of the wooden towers, such as the Mulga Tower in Jefferson County. After all, this age of tower building was still enjoying aesthetic benefits under the sustained influence of the Arts & Crafts Movement in America, which made its indelible stamp upon the National Parks Service architecture. We can all be very grateful for this as the most appropriate design movement to influence or coincide with national and state outdoor conservation programs of the early 20th century. As a case in point, Bunker Tower of Cheaha State Park reveals the influential hand of Boston architect H.H. Richardson upon its design in the use of heavy stone arch-work incorporating the mounted observation



Bunker Tower - Cheaha State Park

(Courtesy of Ryan Cragun)

cab atop the stone tower shaft – a very strong allusion to the ‘Richardsonian’ vocabulary of building. Bunker Tower is also the highest lookout tower in Alabama, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1935 . . . the fraternal twin of the Flagg Mountain Lookout in Coosa County.

During the golden era of lookout tower building in the state, steel towers also followed the influence of the Arts & Crafts Movement design as original examples of sustainability. One of the hallmark tenets of the Arts & Crafts Movement was to celebrate structural function (the tower frame) and to reconcile architecture (the forest observation cab) with nature. As to the question of who manufactured the lookouts, clearly it was the case that Aermotor Company [of Chicago, Illinois] and International Derrick & Equipment Company [of Los Angeles, California and Columbus, Ohio] were the principal fabricators of Alabama's steel towers, as best determined from available records, surviving manufacturer stamps on the tower frame, and educated guesswork.

Despite the fact that Alabama's steel towers don't always have the same company as ‘parents,’ in many cases the overall design composition and configuration share similar themes for



Blacksher Lookout Tower, Monroe County

(Courtesy of AFC)



Pine Mountain Tower, Tuscaloosa County

(Courtesy of AFC)



McGowin Lookout Tower, Butler County

(Courtesy of Author)

the tower frame and cab design: most cabs typically have two windows of proportional panes over a solid wainscot on each side. Some towers in Alabama are really unique and rare, such as the Underwood Lookout Tower in Escambia County. It has so far been an enigma for fire tower experts in certifying its manufacturer and type due to the assembly of four steel cabs together on a wider, broader steel tower frame. Still, the fact remains that if any of these steel cabs were not forest observation tower modules, they could very easily be additions or outbuildings/ greenhouses for Craftsman homes with the right use of historic paint colors of course. Lookout towers are a great fit for the forest, even as shiny galvanized artifacts, and everyone loves them and uses them – as landmarks, historical icons of forest service, or wayfinding compass points. They are a friend of the forest in every way.



Underwood Lookout Tower, Escambia County

For the history and legacy of Alabama's lookout towers, much is owed in retrospect to the vision and foresight of the former Alabama Department of Conservation-Division of Forestry leadership and personnel from that great era of tower building that took place from the early 30s through the early-mid 70s. A review of Alabama forest history and state annual reports will produce a number of important recurring names in the archived narratives: Col. Page S. Bunker, J. Brooks Toler, C.F. Attaway, and J.M. Stauffer, among many others. If there was any one person among these titans of state forestry history which is most closely associated with the epic age of tower building, it was long-time State Forester J.M. Stauffer. He enjoyed a lifetime of hallmark service to our state beginning in 1927 as a young Forest Inspector for the Alabama Commission of Forestry, as it was known then. Stauffer continued to show great promise over time, being promoted to Associate Forester in 1933 in charge of 14 Alabama CCC camps – 12 of which were Forestry camps – the principal 'engine' for the tremendous decade of tower building prior to WWII. In 1937, during his tenure in superintending the CCC camp initiatives, he was promoted to Assistant State Forester in charge of Fire Control. Due to his outstanding leadership, pro-active strategy, and wonderful way with his staff, this very gifted, unassuming and hardworking man earned the title and position of State Forester in 1942. Under his leadership, scores of lookout towers were erected toward the goal of greater fire protection measures and improvements for Alabama. In 1948, Stauffer reported 111 operational lookout towers were in place protecting Alabamians from the threat of fire. By the time of his retirement from the Alabama Forestry Commission in 1970, over 150 had been built – the zenith for lookout towers in the state.



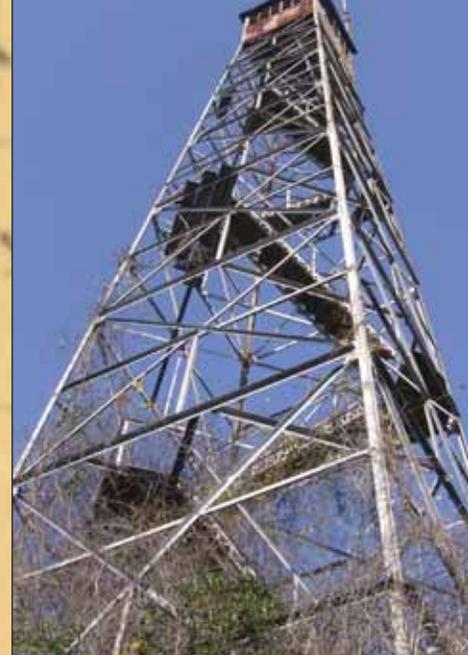
State Forester
J.M. Stauffer, 1942
(Courtesy of
Jane Stauffer Snyder)

But, as surely as there was a zenith, there was also a nadir, which began when aviation and satellite use for detecting fires spelled the end for Alabama's fire towers. With advances in technology, a staffed tower just wasn't needed any longer, and it was only a matter of time before the state towers were reconditioned for use as repeater stations for Alabama Forestry Commission communications. Over time, many towers became 'party central' sites: illegally climbed and vandalized. Some became victims of neglect due to the recurring fiscal issues of budgetary proration. Consequently, a large number have been demolished during the past several years due to these and other concerns. As well, a number of towers either have already or will revert back to the original landowners. Given these conditions, projecting a sustained outlook for retaining the greater majority of our firetowers seems unlikely. The towers could be said to be living on borrowed time, barring anything short of a miraculous windfall of funding to restore them for posterity.

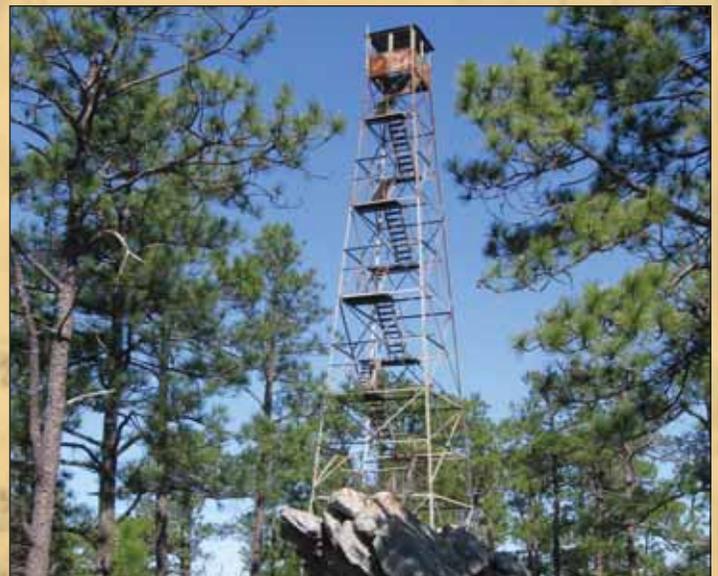


Lookout Tower,
county
(Courtesy of AFC)

But there is hope. Slowly but surely, interest in lookout towers is increasing, along with news of lookouts which have been successfully restored, where those interested in conserving them did not let the seemingly deteriorated appearance of the tower keep them from what was burning in their hearts to do in preserving memory. These people found a way to affect successful and complete restoration initiatives for the following towers: Open Pond Lookout Tower in Conecuh National Forest, the Perry Lakes Birding Tower (formerly Rumley-York Tower) in Perry County, and Longleaf Tower (formerly Huxford Tower) in Butler County. More tower/tower site restoration projects are either being planned or are already underway including Smith Mountain Tower on Lake Martin in Tallapoosa County, as well as Pondville, Payne Lake, Cahaba, and Perry Mountain Lookout Towers in the Talladega National Forest-Oakmulgee Division. This is great news. As more lookouts are restored, project experience and firsthand knowledge becomes available for those contemplating tower restoration initiatives, along with more creative ideas to problem-solve for lookout tower preservation and rehabilitation issues. All of this will prove that there are more possibilities and available options for preserving firetowers than one would imagine at a glance – those with vision, determination, and a can-do spirit, plus an ability to think out of the box will find a way to make it happen. What could be more honoring to the memory of those who have served and protected our state so well?



Lookout Hill Tower,
Monroe County
(Courtesy of AFC)



Smith Mountain Fire Lookout Tower,
Tallapoosa County
(Courtesy of Author)