

Keeping It at 100

By Thomas Kaufmann, Architectural and Historic Preservationist

Alabama is very blessed to still have a plentiful roster of existing forest observation towers within our domain, otherwise known as lookout towers, lookouts, or fire towers. A survey of the total tally of standing lookout towers in each of the 50 states across the U.S. will reveal a varying number per state. Until fairly recently there was one state which had either none, or only one, but a lookout was erected so it could join the ranks of other states which have them.

zones' for fire protection – an ingenious use of geometry overlaid upon the landscape for the maximum public safety and land protection benefit. Today, modern surveillance methods have practically replaced the old 'Towerman' system, yet the towers themselves remain as icons of a bygone, nostalgic 'golden era' of Alabama's state and federal forest service. Without a doubt, they are, and always will be, an immediate symbol of our state and national forests, rivaled only by Smokey Bear.

In seeking answers for what to do with these wonderful structures – so very critical to the historical narrative of our state forests and forestry service – discouragement, anxiety, and fear quickly set in, due to the ominous threat of legal liability in our time. The simple liability-avoidance method is to totally dismantle a lookout altogether, leaving only the foundation below grade. Yet this method is expensive to undertake, as is commonly reported.

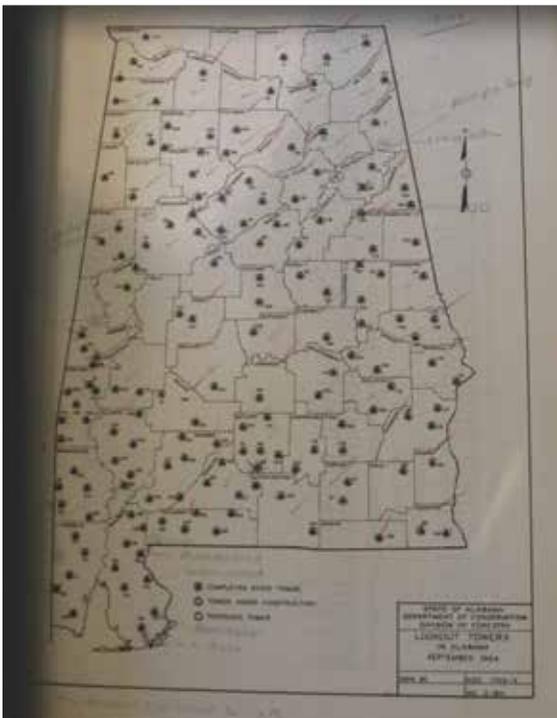
The regretful thought afterwards always seems to be one of remorse among those who remember the lookout. Reports of gladness for a tower being taken down appear to be rare to non-existent among tower-site community members, and the public-at-large. Still, the nagging issue of legal liability remains. What's to be done?

One very positive action, which has already been achieved in a few instances, is making the firetowers available for sale for new uses in new locations within the state of Alabama and beyond. This may seem like the best course of action to take, as the tower is taken down with care, refurbished, and re-erected in a different location for a new use. In fact, the lookout towers were originally designed for 'relocation,' so this is in keeping with a basic premise of the structures' intrinsic concept.

Next to preserving a lookout tower in its original setting, saving it intact for adaptive re-use in new locations is highly commendable, and would be considered the next 'best practices' step in the school of historic preservation thought. The ideas for adaptive re-uses for lookout towers are unlimited.

Still, there is a downside to this type of initiative, which is that our state's fire protection history goes away with the relocated tower. In the event that a county's lone lookout tower is sold and relocated, the largest contributor to the area's forest service history is gone forever. These lookouts are not being manufactured anymore, so the loss of the history is dual in terms of replacing the original article. It is

Image courtesy of Alabama Department of Archives and History



This 1964 Alabama Lookout Tower Map depicts not only completed towers, but also towers under construction and proposed sites of future towers across the state.

It appears that Alabama, once the proud possessor of more than 200 lookouts statewide at one time, currently has around half of that number left standing today. Most of those towers are in need of repairs and rehabilitation for sustained performance and use.

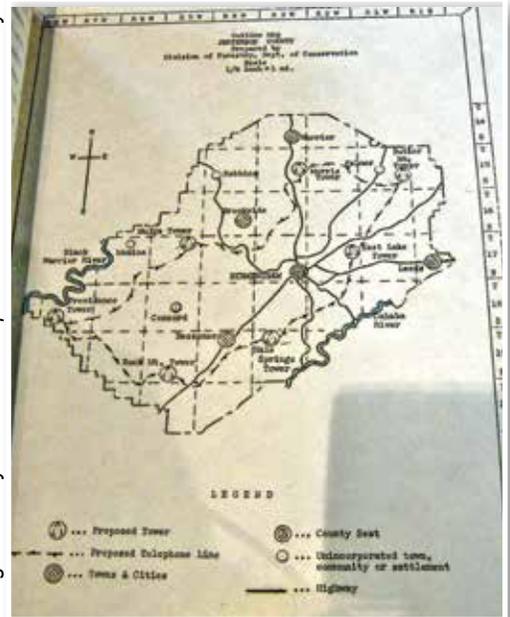
A look back in time will reveal that each county in Alabama had at least one of these grand sentinels keeping watch over the state's forests and timberlands, with some counties having more, creating those incredible and efficient 'triangulated watch



A lookout tower for every county, and then some

O'Neal Lookout Tower, formerly in Limestone County, has now been relocated.

Image courtesy of Alabama Department of Archives and History



This Jefferson County Fire Protection Map, dated 1939, shows the proposed locations of seven tower sites.

not only a loss of the cultural resource, but a loss of cultural memory as well.

The first step to take is to do everything possible to preserve these lookout towers on-site, in place, unharmed. We need to continue to think outside of the box for creative and new solutions to avoid legal liability traps. Let's find ways to measure the towers' true structural integrity and make them safe for standing. Let's begin the process of listing the lookouts on the National Register of Historic Landmarks and Places, along with any other contributing forest service structures that accompany them on the tower sites.

Let's keep it at 100 lookout towers in Alabama . . . one for every county and then some, even if it means that they stand like forgotten windmills in the landscape until they can be given new life. 🏠

Editor's note:

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