

Maryland's Forest Fire Lookout Towers

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the steward of the state's rich legacy of pro-active involvement in the development, conservation and safety of its forests and wilderness areas. In 1915, its predecessor, the Board of Forestry, proposed a system of 30-35 towers to be erected in state forests at twenty-mile spacing, to enable communication between the tower personnel. The towers (typically between 50 and 120 feet in height) were situated to provide unobstructed views of the surrounding woodlands.

In 1906, an initial donation of 2,000 acres of woodlands (Garrett State Forest) contained a contingency that led to the formation of the Maryland State Board of Forestry (1906-23), within the Maryland Agricultural College (MAC), predecessor of the University of Maryland (UMD).

Fred W. Besley (1872-1960, BA from MAC in 1892, and trained in Forestry by Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the US Forest Service) was hired as the first Maryland State Forester (served: 1906-42). Besley and the Board:

- Conducted the Nation's first comprehensive statewide forest survey from 1907-1914
- Hired the first Forest Wardens, tower operators, and Forest Guards (or "Smokechasers") in 1910
- Helped create the first Maryland state parks in 1912
- Following passage of the Roadside Tree Law in 1914, established the first Forest Tree Nursery at the Maryland State College of Agriculture (successor to MAC and currently the College Park campus of the UMD).
- Compiled the Nation's first "Noted-tree List" in 1925; eventually this became the national Big Tree Champion program in 1940.

Maryland co-operated with the neighboring states of Delaware, Virginia, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania to provide coverage along its borders, and commercial firms, private citizens, or counties donated land for the tower sites when state-owned property was not available.

A dozen towers were erected by the New Deal-era Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA); during WWII, many towers also served as aircraft identification stations by the Aircraft Warning Service (AWS).

Following the War, the towers were used to support antenna and transmission systems serving as communications links nationwide; some towers and sites are still used for this purpose.

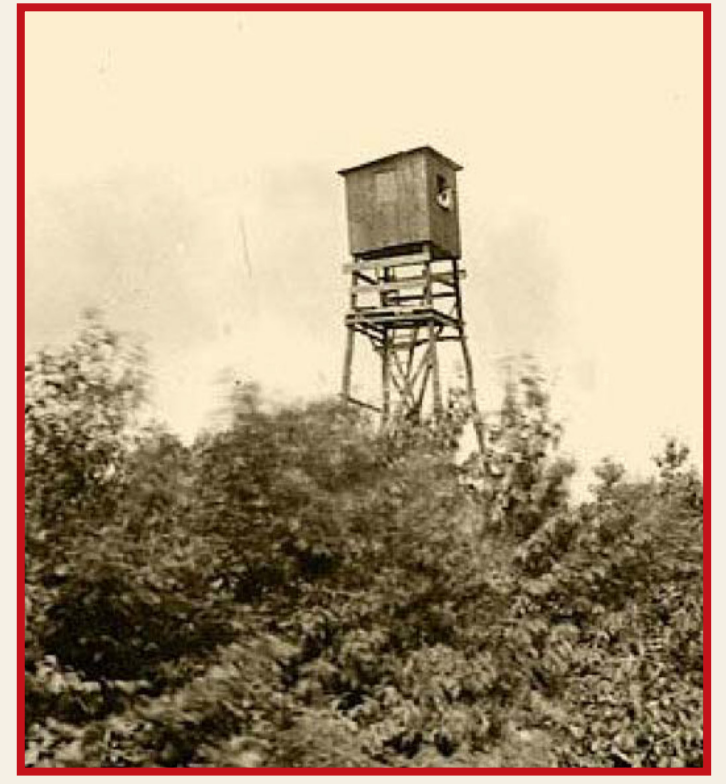
As of 2014, twenty-four towers remain: most of the towers are visible from adjacent roads and highways. Nearly all the towers or sites on public land are reachable by hiking. Four are climbable by visitors with on-site arrangement (see: Map #43 Fairview, #44 Lathrop E. Smith, #45 Merkle NRMA, and #46 Chesapeake Fire Museum).

Some of the towers have been deemed eligible by the Maryland Historical Trust for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, for their association with the governmental response to the problem of forest fires and co-ordination of fire-fighting efforts, dating to the 1930's-40's. Five towers are included in the National Historic Lookout Register.

Map Key

Current Site

Former Site



Central				
ID	Name	Date	Height (ft.)	Note
9	Foys Hill	1924	60	
14	Stoney Forest	1929	80, 120	Replaced with communications tower
27	Woodlawn	1935	100	
29	Pleasant Hill	late-1930's	100	
32	Madonna	1939	100	CCC-built; Replaced by communications tower, 1983
36	Cub Hill	1943	120	Western Union antenna
40	Black Hill	mid-1940's	100	Western Union antenna; Only tower with 2 existing cabs
42	Cardiff	1960's	7	Slate slag site; Share with Pennsylvania

Eastern				
ID	Name	Date	Height (ft.)	Note
13	Nassawango	1929	120	Highest tower in nation when built in 1929; National Historic Lookout Register
16	Quantico	1931	100	Relocated to #46 Hebron
17	Interstate	1931	100, 120	CCC-built; Share with Delaware
20	Church Creek	1932	120	National Historic Lookout Register
28	Greenhill	1935	120	CCC-built
33	Shiloh	1939	120	CCC-built
37	Powellville	1943	140	Highest fire-tower East of the Mississippi River
46	Hebron	1990's	100	Relocated from Quantico to Chesapeake Fire Museum; National Historic Look-out Register

Far West				
ID	Name	Date	Height (ft.)	Note
1	Bittinger	1915	60	1st (wood) tower erected in Maryland Relocated to #41 Eagle Rock
2	Snaggy Mountain	1918	40	Relocated to #2a in West Virginia
2a	Snaggy Mountain		60	Adjacent to border (in West Virginia)
4	Thayerville	1921	47, 80	1st tower supplied by Aermotor Company; CCC-built; National Historic Lookout Register; Maryland Forestry and Parks Centennial plaque, 2006
5	Dans Rock	1921	15, 60	
6	Warrior Mountain	1922	47, 110	Replaced by communications tower
18	Town Hill	1931	80	
22	High Rock	1934	86	Chimney ruins at base; National Historic Lookout Register
23	Elder Hill	1934	86	CCC-built
26	Negro Mountain	mid-1930's	90	
35	Roth Rock	early-1940's	107	Highest base elevation (3,252 ft.) in Maryland
41	Eagle Rock	1953	80	Relocated from Bittinger

Near West				
ID	Name	Date	Height (ft.)	Note
3	Foxville	1920	50	
7	Quirauk	1922	80	W Maryland RR observation tower for Pen Mar Park prior to fire tower Works with Mt Dunlap Tower, Pa
11	Hamburg	1926	60	
24	Lambs Knoll	1934	91	Frederick-Washington County line; Removed in 2006
31	Salamander Rock	1939	100	CCC-built; Cabin ruins at base
34	McClellan's	early-1940's	60	Overlooks Antietam Battlefield
38	Sideling Hill	mid-1940's	100	Western Union antenna
39	Gambrell	mid-1940's	60	Western Union antenna Two cabs (both removed)
43	Fairview	1990's	120	Relocated from Brandywine

Southern				
ID	Name	Date	Height (ft.)	Note
8	Long Hill	1923	60, 110	Western Union antenna Tower, house, ranger facilities
10	Muirkirk	1926	60	Relocated to #19 Burtonsville
12	Brandywine	1928	93, 120	CCC-built; Relocated to #43 Fairview
15	Hillmeade	1931	100	
19	Burtonsville	1932	100	Owned by UMD - College Park Removed in 2014
21	Great Mills	1933	120	Relocated to #44 Lathrop E Smith
25	Welcome	1934	120	CCC-built
30	Hollofield	1939	100	CCC-built; Relocated to #45 Merkle Replaced by communications tower
44	Lathrop E Smith	1985	shortened	Relocated from Great Mills to Environmental Education Center in Rockville
45	Merkle NRMA		shortened	Relocated from Hollifield Only tower regularly open to public



Burtonsville Fire Tower

A 60 foot-high Forest Fire Lookout Tower was erected at 7813 Muirkirk Road (Map #10) by the Department of Forestry in 1926. This was the final tower site to be rediscovered and identified in the state, as there are no physical remains at the site.

The tower was dismantled and re-assembled (Map #19) along Columbia Pike (US Route 29) at Dustin Road in Burtonsville, Maryland in 1932; a single-story gable-end concrete masonry shed and a single-story concrete masonry shed-roofed privy were also provided.

Fire-detection ceased at this facility by the mid-1970's; it was conveyed to the University of Maryland by DNR for communications use in 1985; transmission systems were attached and operated until the year 2000. The communications function is no longer used by the University, and the facility was demolished in 2014 due to its deteriorated condition and the lack of communications need.



Sources: Barbara M Garner, A View from the Top, Maryland's Fire Towers, Abocoarian Books, Balowin, Maryland, 2012
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Will Williams and Monte Mitchell, History of the Maryland DNR Forest Service Wildfire Program <http://www.dnr.state.md.us/forests/programs/pdfs/history.pdf>
Maryland Department of Natural Resources webpage: <http://www.dnr.state.md.us/forests/ghistory.asp>
Maryland Forestry and Parks Centennial: 1906-2006: MdDNR Forest Service: 100 years of Forest Conservation, Historical Milestones and Legislative Authorities; <http://www.dnr.state.md.us/centennial/milestones.asp>

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