

# HISTORIAN'S CORNER

"Saving the past for the future"

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## Bear Mountain's Lost Fire Tower



Bear Mountain Tower

The Bear Mountain Fire Tower was erected in 1923 on the true summit of Bear Mountain in the northeastern part of Harriman/Bear Mountain State Park, NY.

Originally the mountain is thought to have been named "Bare Mountain" because in early pioneer days, so many fires had burnt the side and top. Henry Hudson's log refers to it as "Baer Hill", but by the Revolutionary War days it was being called Bear Mountain.

In the early days of West Point Military Academy, the Army owned much of that area including a good bit of Bear Mountain itself. Through land deals with the new State Park established by Mary Harriman in 1901, by the 1920's, the summit was traded by the Army for other parcels of land nearer the academy.

In 1923, a steel fire tower was erected on the summit of Bear Mountain through mutual



Fingerboard Mountain Tower

Diamond Mountain Fire Tower was erected using the former Bear Mountain steel tower; the exact date of this is unknown. Years afterward when I became a New Jersey District Forest Firewarden, with help from Section Firewarden Kevin Drake, Bill Wilmouth and Bill Orlandi and with Ranger Sullivan facilitating, we rescued the steel frames and observation cab parts from the salvage yard at Merritt Bank in Harriman State Park, and spirited the remains away in two flatbed truckloads to the Division yard then at Franklin, NJ. A few days afterward, Bill Wilmouth made a trip to New York, and with Ranger Sullivan's help, retrieved the set of aluminum sash windows from Tim's Iona Island "bone yard". These were from the second

cooperation of the State Conservation Department and the State Park Commission that was in its infancy.

It was staffed by Park Rangers, and probably at first did not, if ever, have a power line to it. It was a 60-foot tower, having 9 landings and is distinguished from other Park towers by the observation cab's 9-pane windows. It stood on the summit of Bear Mountain until 1930 when it was removed, likely due to the new Perkins Memorial Tower being built about 300 feet to the west. The 50-foot stone tower when completed could be used for observation, which made the steel tower obsolete at that location. The Perkins Tower remains today as the Appalachian Trail passes by its base. The footings still exist on the old tower's site on the massive rock face. Before then, there had been a wooden "signal tower" on the rock face used for surveying or early fire spotting; a postcard of Signal Tower #54 was provided many years ago by former NY FFLA director Fred Knauf.

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Diamond Mountain fire tower that had been erected in 1966, after the first one (the old Bear Mountain tower) had been taken down.

The original name for the hill was called Halfway Mountain on early maps and then later, Diamond Mountain. The tower had no power line and no phone line as it was in a very remote location and because of that, it unfortunately became the target of severe vandalism that continually was broken into and the windows destroyed. Probably for those reasons, it was finally removed in the early 1950's. But by the 1960's, forest fires again plagued the heavily-used park. The nearest state-operated fire tower was at Sterling Forest, some eleven miles to the west and on privately accessed property. The steel fire tower that had been built on Jackie Jones Mountain was also too far away to adequately see the western section of the park. Ranger Sullivan lobbied the Administration to again get a tower erected on Diamond Mountain. He was successful and a new steel Aermotor LS-40 tower was purchased and shipped to New York. The steel frames from this tower were stenciled profusely with the shipping information "**Diamond Mountain Road, Palisades Inter-State Park NY**". The one different feature of this tower was its windows; they were a modern design double aluminum frame, one per side. These were provided by the Park.

The new fire tower was in use by 1966, but there were still no power or phone lines run to the tower, even though it was only a short distance from heavily hiked to Pine Meadow Lake. Again, vandalism took its toll. Ranger Sullivan manufactured a round "plane" or map table for the tower that curiously did not have Diamond Mountain's location in its center. It was made by piecing together different map sections of the Park, and showed the



Old Bear Mountain

In any event, after 1930, with the steel tower removed, the Perkins stone tower was completed and opened in 1933 under the CCC administration. It remains as a "private" tower but open to the public and is managed and funded by the Perkins family through the State Park. At some point, it was realized a lookout tower was needed in the heavily wooded western end of the State Park. A steel tower was built on Fingerboard Mountain, near old Beaver Pond, later-day Lake Tioroti. This was a standard LS-40 Aermotor model with 4-pane windows in each sash. Fingerboard was located in the very center of the Harriman State Park but suffered greatly from vandalism and was removed in the early 1980's.

location of Jackie Jones and Fingerboard fire towers. He also had made several aluminum "pointers", graduated off in one-mile etchings. Through the 1960's and especially during the bad forest fire years of 1963 and 1964, Diamond Mountain was extensively in use, however the lack of availability of portable radios with a good range plagued fire fighters in these mountainous areas.

Dave Quam remembers flying over the top of the Diamond Mountain tower in his floatplane on fire patrol flights for New York and New Jersey. But, with a decrease in park personnel, maintenance problems, and continued vandalism, the tower was finally doomed. On hikes there in the late 70's and early 80's, Larry Paul recalls the last times the tower stood. By 1983, it had been removed by the Park and its parts taken to the Merritt Bank yard where it joined the steel of the Fingerboard tower and the original Bear Mountain tower.

The fire history of Orange and Rockland counties is well noted in the state's history as at times being devastating and costly to fight aggressively, yet fire towers such as Bear Mountain, Fingerboard and Diamond Mountain were taken down for reasons of maintenance or vandalism. The rare photos in this short history are certainly treasured items of the past. Hopefully, more will surface in the future.

**Bob Spear**  
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### Additional photo annotations -

**Bear Mountain** - Photos of the Bear Mountain tower have long been sought; these and others come by way of FFLA member Jerry Kiernan of Cornwall-on-Hudson. It isn't known if in fact this photo is of the tower as it looked on Bear Mountain or its later location on Diamond Mountain in the western part of Harriman State Park.

**Fingerboard Mountain** - Fingerboard Mountain fire tower c. 1978. The phone pole in the foreground still can be found at the site. Larry Paul photo

**Old Bear Mountain** - This photo from Jerry Kiernan is believed to be of the old Bear Mountain tower as it stood on Diamond Mountain. Note the same 18-pane per side window configuration. Larry Paul remembers visiting the tower here and commenting, *"It was the only fire tower I'd visited where the cab was painted green."*