Maryland's Fire Lookout Towers

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the steward of the state’s rich legacy of 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) provided 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 (1917-1940; 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 of the 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 worked with the neighboring states of Delaware, Virginia, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania to provide coverage along its borders. Commercial firms, private citizens, or counties donated land for the tower sites when state-owned property was not available.

Ten 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 Wac, 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-three towers remain, many of which are visible from adjacent roads and highways. Nearly all the sites or sites on public land are reachable by hiking. Four towers remain open and climbable to visitors. One, #44 Lathrop E Smith (NRMA), is open to the public and three (#4 Forestview, #44 Lethrop E. Smith, and #44 Chesapeake Fire Museum) require on-site permission.

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 government’s response to the problem of forest fires and the evolution of fire-fighting efforts, dating to the 1930s-40s. Five towers are included in the National Historic Lookout Register.

Burtonsville Fire Tower

A 60-foot-high Forest Fire Lookout Tower was erected near 7813 Muirkirk Road (Map #10) by the Department of Forestry in 1932. This was the final tower site to be surveyed and identified in this state, as there are no physical remains of the site. As of 2014, twenty-three towers remain, many of which are visible from adjacent roads and highways. Nearly all the sites or sites on public land are reachable by hiking. Four towers remain open and climbable to visitors. One, #44 Lathrop E Smith (NRMA), is open to the public and three (#4 Forestview, #44 Lethrop E. Smith, and #44 Chesapeake Fire Museum) require on-site permission.

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