

# Robin's Hill Tower has mighty history

Have you ever wondered about the tower on the top of Robin's Hill between the Center and South Villages? Why is it there? What goes on in the 10 foot square "box" atop those skinny legs?

Actually, it's part of the state's forest fire observatory network, built as a place from which to spot wisps of smoke that might develop into a woods fire. It is the fourth tower to occupy this site. The first was erected in 1911, so 1986 is the 75th anniversary of the program.

That first tower was an 8' x 8' wooden "box" mounted on a galvanized iron structure. It was 30 feet high and a ladder was used to reach the observatory.

In February, 1918, the state purchased a 50' x 50' piece of land on the top of Robin's Hill and, in September of that year, erected the second tower which was more than twice the height of its predecessor.


It was a 68-foot high structure with a 10:1 cape-type stairs. The Town of Chelmsford donated \$300 to the cost and many other towns of Middlesex County also made donations. The state bore the remainder of the expense.

In the middle of the room, there was a round table with a telephone — the "candlestick" type with a hook on the left side on which to hang the receiver — hanging from the ceiling.

A map of the surrounding country was mounted under glass on the table top with the location of the tower in the center. An alidade, or sighting rod, was pivoted in the

The way  
It was

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center of the map. When smoke was spotted, the alidade was rotated to point in the direction of the sighting.

If the fire was nearby it could be pinpointed directly and the fire department notified. Otherwise, a phone call was made to one of the other towers and, from their sighting, the location was quickly determined by simple triangulation.

This tower served the forest fire service for 20 years. However, the great hurricane of Sept. 21, 1938 leveled it. The observer's sons had been on the top landing enjoying the brisk breezes but descended just before the tower was blown over, completely smashing both the steel supports and the "box."

The fire danger was particularly critical following the storm because of the thousands of trees that had been felled. So, the state immediately erected a temporary wooden tower as a stopgap measure. Although, only slightly higher than the tree tops, it served its purpose.

The following summer, 1939, the present tower was erected. It is very much like the 1918 model, being 68-feet high and having a 10' x 10' room.

Communications were improved in 1947 with the addition of a FM radio receiver and transmitter. The wooden "box" or house was completely replaced about 1970. You may have noticed microwave antennae attached to the tower.

According to Hollis Wilkins, the present observer, the tower serves only to elevate someone else's antennae; they have nothing to do with the forest fire service.

Because the summit of the hill has an elevation of over 400 feet, it had served as a look-out many years before 1911. Tradition says that the local Indians used it before the white settlers arrived. Supposedly they received signals from farther west when the warlike Mohawks were approaching. Signals were then sent to Fort Hill in Lowell on which they had built a fort.

Waters *History of Chelmsford* tells us that in 1673 "the Town built a house upon Robins Hill, the purpose of which is not clear. It was neither sufficiently large nor substantial for a garrison house, being of one room, 16' x 18', covered with but a single thickness of boards, and with but one window... The place was admirably adapted for a lookout from which to discover and warn people of approaching danger."

So we can see that Robins' Hill has been used as a lookout for over 300 years.

Times really haven't changed.

X-12 Observations from Forest Fire Service