

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### MOUNT WASHBURN FIRE LOOKOUT

HABS NO. WY-173

**Location** South end of Chittenden Road, Canyon Village Vicinity, Yellowstone National Park, Park County, Wyoming.

Zone 12, 544778.14m E, 4960600.81m N (Center of Mount Washburn Fire Lookout, NAD83).

**Significance** The Mount Washburn Fire Lookout is significant both as a reflection of the development of systematic wildland fire detection in the National Parks and as an example of New Deal Era programs in the parks. Fire management improvements, including the construction of fire lookouts, were an important component of the New Deal. There were only seventeen fire lookouts in the national park system in 1930. By 1941, there were seventy-four primary and secondary lookouts in the system.<sup>1</sup> Many others were constructed on National Forest lands.

Constructed in 1941, the Mount Washburn Fire Lookout was inspired by the observations by John D. Coffman, the first wildland fire suppression expert hired by the National Park Service. He observed, in 1929, that the existing fire lookout on Mount Washburn (constructed in 1921) was inadequate to serve the needs of fire spotters based in the facility and asserted that the structure required significant renovations.<sup>2</sup> Coffman's recommendations came at a time when funding was not available for such projects. However, the fire lookout remained a concern.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal offered hope that the deficiencies of the Mount Washburn Fire lookout would finally be addressed. The National Park Service considered various renovations for the structure over a four-year period, but ultimately decided to raze the existing structure and construct a new building. The new fire lookout represented a shift from the rustic architecture of the time. While other New Deal fire lookouts in Yellowstone embraced the use of native stone and log, the Mount Washburn lookout, which incorporated Art Deco elements, was constructed of reinforced concrete.<sup>3</sup> The design and construction materials are unique in National Park Service fire lookout construction during the New Deal era.

The National Park Service modified the Mount Washburn Fire Lookout in 1980 to allow for the installation of telecommunications equipment, but the building retains its function and much of its original design.

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Rothman, *A Test of Adversity and Strength: Wildland Fire in the National Park System* (National Park Service, Wildland Fire Program, Washington, DC, 2006), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Rothman, *A Test of Adversity and Strength*, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Sievert & Sievert CRC, and Montana Preservation Alliance, *Historic Structure Report for Mount Washburn Fire Lookout* (National Park Service, Yellowstone National Park, April 2011), 4.

Description     The original 1941 portion of the Mount Washburn Fire Lookout is a three-story, 25'-6" square building constructed on a concrete foundation. The first floor, as originally intended, contains public restrooms. The entire second-floor was originally used for the fire spotter's residence and storage. Modifications to the building in 1980 resulted in the reconfiguration of the second floor to hold telecommunications equipment. The third floor of the tower is the fire spotter's observation room. A flat concrete roof with prominent eaves tops the fire lookout. Telecommunications equipment is affixed to all exterior walls of the building in various configurations.

Modifications to the building occurred prior to 1946 and in 1980. The first alteration consisted of a frame addition to the exterior south facing portion of the building. The addition was a shelter and viewing space for visitors. It likely also provided storage space. The 1980 changes were more substantial. The wood frame addition was replaced by a two-story precast concrete addition that incorporated telecommunications equipment storage on the ground floor and visitor space on the second floor.<sup>4</sup>

The original portion of the building has a painted brush hammer finish. The 1980 addition is smooth unpainted concrete.

The north facing side of the lookout has two fixed six-light windows evenly spaced across the first-floor façade. Plywood infill has replaced original metal louvers above the windows. Second-floor fenestration consist of a single central window space. The original window has been replaced with with ventilation equipment. The third floor is the observation tower and will be discussed below.

The first floor of the west façade has an entrance on its south end. A fixed ribbon of three six-light windows is located near the north end of the wall. Plywood infill has replaced original metal louvers above the windows. The second floor has no openings. The east exterior wall of the building mirrors the west wall.

The south-facing portion of the lookout is dominated by the 1980 addition. The ground floor of the addition, which holds telecommunications equipment, is covered in vinyl sheeting on its south wall. An entrance door is located on the addition's west-facing portion. An interpretive center is located on the second floor of the addition. It is characterized by large single-light fixed windows on three sides. The addition's roof holds an observation deck surrounded by metal railing. A metal staircase leads from the observation deck to the fire lookout's third floor. There are two entry doors at the west end of the south-facing portion of the tower. Two window openings are located along the east half of the south side of the second floor. One holds a six-light window. The other window has been replaced by ventilation equipment. The original portion of the building's south side held the entrance to public restrooms, which are still accessible from inside the addition.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 6.

The third floor of the fire lookout is the fire spotter's observation tower, which is constructed of steel, instead of concrete. The entire level is surrounded by a metal promenade with steel railing. Five large two-light windows and an off-center entry door span the south façade. The west, east, and north sides of the observation tower each have six large two-light windows spanning their walls.

The interior of the observation tower is finished with gypsum wallboard and built-in cabinets. The floor is covered in carpet. Second floor interior spaces are composed of storage areas and interior stairwells. The original first floor has men's and women's restrooms, with chemical toilets. An open interpretive center and shelter comprise the interior of the second-floor addition. Walls are dominated by large windows. The floor is concrete and the ceiling is clad in tongue and groove wooden panels. The ground floor of the addition is unfinished and holds telecommunications equipment.

The south, east and west sides of the lookout tower are surrounded by conspicuous laid rock retaining walls. The walls also extend down a portion of the tower access road (Chittenden Road). The walls likely date to the construction of the original fire lookout in 1921. A circular parking area is located north of the building. The natural landscape surrounding the site is essentially bare of vegetation.

## History

The Mount Washburn Fire Lookout is one of three fire lookout stations in Yellowstone National Park. It is the only facility accessible by vehicle and continuously staffed during fire season (mid-June into the autumn). The other two lookouts are in the backcountry at Mount Holmes and Mount Sheridan. Initially developed as a fire lookout in 1921, the Mount Washburn site has historically been the primary fire detection and observation facility in the Park.

The original Mount Washburn Fire Lookout was a native stone multipurpose building with a public shelter forming the bottom floor and a small, roughly 8-foot square, fire lookout making up the top floor. Small windows punctuated all sides of the building, limiting its usefulness as a fire lookout.<sup>5</sup>

The building's limitations became apparent in subsequent years as the National Park Service began developing a comprehensive fire management program, partly in response to fires that devastated nearby Glacier National Park in the 1920s. Indeed, the Northern Montana park suffered from the cumulative effects of fire to such a level that, by 1920, annual losses from fire exceeded the park's annual budget. Nonetheless, the National Park Service was not proactive in developing or adequately funding a coordinated fire management program until the late 1920s.<sup>6</sup> A shockingly intense fire season in 1926 that burned over 50,000 acres in Glacier National Park finally forced the National Park Service to address the fire management in the parks. Just fighting the fires in one park

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<sup>5</sup> National Park Service Landscape and Engineering Division, "Fire Lookout and Public Shelter: Mt. Washburn," National Park Service Technical Information Center Document YELL\_101\_1845, June 28, 1921, viewable at <https://pubs.etic.nps.gov/>; Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Rothman, *A Test of Adversity and Strength*, 8, 40.

cost the agency over \$200,000 and required the employment over 3,500 fire fighters. The entire firefighting budget for the National Park Service was \$38,000.<sup>7</sup>

The National Park Service ultimately turned to John W. Coffman, a Forest Service manager and forester, to develop their fledgling fire management program.<sup>8</sup> Coffman initially focused on Glacier National Park, but eventually weighed in on conditions at other parks, including Yellowstone. The early detection of fires using fire lookouts was a cornerstone of his firefighting philosophy and he did not consider the Mount Washburn fire lookout suitable to the task. Coffman noted in 1929 that the lookout was not adequate.<sup>9</sup> The park needed more lookouts and better facilities. A lack of funding, however, prevented immediate action on Coffman's suggested infrastructural changes.

The election of 1932 represented a monumental shift in park infrastructure funding. Newly elected President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, introduced his New Deal for the American people. The New Deal was a collection of federal programs, funding and initiatives that provided western land managers with resources and support for a wide array of programs, including firefighting.

The infusion of New Deal funding invigorated the effort to address the limitations of the Mount Washburn Fire Lookout. As early as 1934, Yellowstone Chief Ranger George F. Baggeley requested funding to renovate the building. He expressed concern that the windows were so small they prevented its use as an effective fire lookout.<sup>10</sup> The renovations did not immediately occur and four years later the park decided to replace the entire lookout. Park plans called for the construction of a new combined fire lookout/public contact station on Mount Washburn.

Funded by two New Deal programs, the project began in 1939. The demolition of the 1921 fire lookout, supported by a \$288.10 grant from the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act, began in 1939.<sup>11</sup> Construction of the new lookout, which ran about \$6,000 over budget, was funded by appropriations of nearly \$17,500 under the Public Works Administration. Perhaps due to the budget overrun, the new lookout, completed in 1941, did not include the public contact station.<sup>12</sup>

The Mount Washburn lookout represented a departure from previous fire lookouts constructed in Yellowstone and throughout the National Park System. Fire lookouts at Mount Sheridan and Mount Holmes followed established National Park Service rustic design standards and guidance. Designed to blend into the landscape, they employed native stone and wood. The Mount Washburn Fire Lookout, on the other hand, was constructed of concrete and metal. Instead of blending into the surrounding landscape, the lookout reflected modernist architectural influences, including subtle art deco styling and massing.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 47- 48.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>10</sup> Sievert & Sievert, *Historic Structure Report*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

A wooden addition was constructed on the south facing exterior wall of the lookout sometime between 1942 and 1946. The addition was apparently constructed to support Mountain Bell (now CenturyLink) telecommunications equipment, but it also served as a viewing shelter. The addition compensated for the public contact station that was eliminated from the original construction of the lookout.<sup>13</sup> The wooden structure was replaced with a more substantial addition in 1980.

U.S. West (now CenturyLink) entered into an agreement with the National Park Service in 1980 to collocate telecommunication equipment on the building, resulting in additional modifications to the fire lookout. The 1940s addition was removed and replaced by a concrete addition that incorporated storage space for telecommunications equipment on the ground floor and a visitor contact station on the second floor.<sup>14</sup> The tower continues to support telecommunications antennas from various companies while also serving the National Park Service's fire management and visitor experience goals.

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<sup>13</sup> National Park Service Branch of Plans & Design, "Fire Lookout and Shelter: Mt. Washburn, Yellowstone National Park" National Park Service Technical Information Center Document YELL\_101\_2519\_B, June 6, 1939, viewable at <https://pubs.etic.nps.gov/>; National Park Service, Yellowstone National Park "Mount Washburn Tower, Mountain Bell Expansion" National Park Service Technical Information Center Document YELL-60235, no date, viewable at <https://pubs.etic.nps.gov/>; The exact date of the addition is unclear. It was not constructed in 1942 but was present in 1946 photographs. See Ibid, footnote xxii, pg. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 9.

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Historian      Steven C. Baker, PaleoWest Archaeology Llc., 2018.