

Old Sentinel Fire Tower

by FFLA Historian Bob Spear – April 2016

I was told about this tower originally by Firewarden Kevin Drake who spotted it above the trees from the back of a fire truck coming home from a “parade” Later Bob Wolff and I investigated it and after some difficulty of finding the entrance driveway between the mature Norway Spruce trees along South Orange Avenue, we drove in and introduced ourselves to the resident living at the house. A Mr. Plant, who as it turns out was the son of the man who served as the Observer in the tower during bad fire weather. At the time, I climbed all the way to the top of the 100’ tower using the stairways which were extremely rusty. Inside the cab I found a small table and an old dial type telephone and heavy electric cables to run a Fire Siren. A curious “Counter-weight” system helped raise the heavy trap door in the floor. All the windows were still intact at the time. The Surrounding forest was very thick with mature trees, surprising for this heavily industrialized and residential area of East Orange, New Jersey. One would think you were in the wilds of Pennsylvania instead of only a few miles from Manhattan, New York !. Mr Plant explained the Watershed at one time had it’s own Brush truck and fire crew and up to a few years ago the 1926 Chevrolet was still housed in the headquarters garage!.

When one thinks of New Jersey, such a sight as a one hundred foot fire tower within a short bus ride of the Hudson River crossing to New York City would not be possible but here it was !

The Tower may have been built as early as 1904 with at first a 100’ verticle rung ladder- the inside stairway was added later and quite possibly there was an earlier fire tower on the site as there remained three smaller concrete foundations under the larger one. This is perhaps the ONLY Blaw-Knox 100 foot tower left in existence and certainly the ONLY one ever in New Jersey.

Bob Wolff decided against climbing the tower and stood guard at the bottom, perhaps if an ambulance may be needed?! I later re-visited the site with Mark Haughwout and Scott Ritter* who suggested the reason for only three smaller footings remaining was that one had been removed to make room for the larger tower which seemed reasonable at the time.

I could not help but equate the appearance of this huge steel tower under the overhanging trees, to that of some prehistoric dinosaur re-discovered ! There was some talk of putting paging aerals on the tower, unknown if that was ever done.