

WHITE ROCK LOOKOUT TOWER  
(Mount Cammerer Lookout Tower)  
Great Smoky Mountains National Park  
On Mount Cammerer near the Appalachian Trail  
Cosby  
Cocke County  
Tennessee

HABS TN-262  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
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FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
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# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

## WHITE ROCK LOOKOUT TOWER

(Mount Cammerer Lookout Tower)

HABS No. TN-262

**Location:** Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Cosby, Cocke County, Tennessee  
(Zone 17, longitude: -83.1613047, latitude: 35.7634997)

**Significance:** The White Rock Lookout Tower, built between 1937 and 1939 by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), is representative of that time's fire management policy of complete fire suppression in all national parks and forests. The young men of the CCC provided the labor to construct thousands of fire towers across the country, including nine of the ten found in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GRSM). These sites served as a cohesive unit that both detected and suppressed fires. In spite of their reliance on other towers, the lookouts lived a life of isolation that required the patience to watch the forests daily from sunrise to sunset and the agility to be on alert at a moment's notice during a lightning storm. In the 1970s, fire management techniques and approaches to fire patrol changed, and the towers in GRSM were abandoned. Over the next decade, the park removed most of the structures from this fire management system, and the White Rock Lookout Tower is one of only four remaining towers within the park's boundary.

This tower and other fire towers across the country have evolved through the years from functional structures to symbolic architecture. They provide some of the only references to early Park architecture in their remote locations and show how man has intervened on the landscape and left his mark.

**Description:** White Rock Lookout Tower is a two-story, octagonal stone and log structure with a design based on the National Park Service's standard Type No. 9 tower.

The observation level has a regular, octagonal plan measuring 17'8-1/2" in diameter. This main floor is clear of any structural components that might obstruct the lookout's view of the mountain he was hired to protect. A catwalk measuring 2'6" in width wraps the entire observation level and is supported by 9" log braces, which meet the tower's stone base 3'6" below the catwalk's underside at each of the eight corners. A handrail of rough-hewn logs encircles the catwalk and stands 4'-1/2" tall.

The entrance to the observation level is found on the western façade and is reached by ascending four stairs from the rocky outcrop on which the tower sits. A simple batten door is located in the center of the western façade and flanked by two single-hung windows with one-over-one lights. Each of the other seven sides contains three bays of windows, also single-hung with one-over-one lights. The exterior, stone wall extends 2'4" up from the catwalk to a wooden sill below the windows on all sides. Windows make up the remaining portion of the exterior walls for the observation level.

Where the wall meets the roof, in the center of each of the eight facades, a small rectangular screen, measuring 3-3/4" x 2', allows for air movement within the observation level.

This structure is topped by a pyramidal roof covered in wooden shakes. The roof is supported by a fanned brace system of logs, which meet at a central post. Four logs extend slightly beyond the tower walls on each façade, one at each corner and two splitting the difference of the remaining side. The central post extends down 5' from the board ceiling, ending 7'3" above the observation level floor. At the base of the post, an interlocking web of 1/2"-metal rods provides additional support for the structure.

Another simple batten door provides entrance to the lower level of the tower on the southwest façade. For roughly the first three decades of use, this lower level provided shelter for the lookout on duty in the observation level above. It has an uneven dirt floor, solid stone walls, and allows access to the 1400-gallon cistern. The interior of this lower level measures 16'8" in diameter, with walls approximately 2'1-1/4" thick at the foundation.

**History:**

At an elevation of 5,025 feet, the White Rock Lookout Tower straddles the Tennessee-North Carolina border and sits just off the Appalachian Trail. The site, which had a ten-watt radio for contacting park headquarters central dispatch office, could be reached via a five-mile horse trail from the truck trail in Cosby, Tennessee.<sup>i</sup> With a price-tag \$15,585 in the 1930s, it was by far the most expensive tower built in the park, as it was actually constructed on-site rather than ordered and erected as the other pre-fabricated towers were.<sup>ii</sup> During construction, the mountain was known as White Rock by Tennesseans, but was later renamed to honor National Park Service director, Arno B. Cammerer, who was influential in the formation of GRSM.

When the White Rock Lookout Tower was proposed in the mid-1930s, there was great debate regarding the tower style used at this location. A steel tower similar to the others in GRSM was originally suggested, but because of its location on a rocky outcrop and the belief that a tower in this section of the park would have high tourist traffic, the visually pleasing, octagonal structure was eventually chosen.<sup>iii</sup>

Thomas Vint, the chief landscape architect at NPS from 1927 to 1938, is credited with the tower's design.<sup>iv</sup> Vint was a 1920 graduate of the University of California and worked under rustic-architects, Gilbert Stanley Underwood and Herbert Maier who were instrumental in the designs of Yosemite National Park. The rustic style made popular by these two mentors is apparent in the timber and stone design found at White Rock/Mount Cammerer.

This tower was operational as a fire lookout station and provided lookout housing during GRSM's two annual fire seasons from 1939 through the 1960s. In addition to using CCC labor to construct the tower, CCC men were stationed in the tower until that group dissolved in 1942. In a manual given to all lookouts, they were charged with a motto of "CONSTANT VIGILANCE

AND ALERTNESS” regarding their duties as protectors of the forests, and were told, “Remember that every day is *Fire Day*.”<sup>v</sup> A lookout’s job was never done – until the 1970s, when fire management techniques changed, the towers were abandoned and lookout positions became obsolete.

After the tower no longer served a functional use in park safety, it fell into disrepair, yet it remained a popular hiking destination. In the 1990s a group of hiking enthusiasts “rediscovered” the tower and began campaigning for its restoration.<sup>vi</sup> They eventually created the Friends of the Smokies group and raised enough awareness and funding for a complete restoration. This included installation of a new catwalk and new exterior stairs, replacement of exterior doors, pine flooring, and a cedar shake roof, and repairing boarded-up windows.

**Sources:** Culpin, Mary Shivers. “Thomas Vint,” *National Park Service: The First 75 Years, Biographical Vignettes*.  
[http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/sontag/vint.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/sontag/vint.htm) (accessed April 11, 2011).

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**Historian:** Laura Beth Ingle

**Project Information:** This project was conducted as a component of a master’s thesis for Clemson University/College of Charleston Master of Science in Historic Preservation program. The principle faculty advisor was Ashley Robbins Wilson.

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<sup>i</sup> National Park Service, General Master Plan, November 1940, “Fire Lookouts.”

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Superintendent J. Ross Eakin correspondence with various park officials, dated October 1936 to July 1937, GRSM Maintenance files.

<sup>iv</sup> Mary Shivers Culpin, “Thomas Vint,” *National Park Service: The First 75 Years, Biographical Vignettes*.  
[http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/sontag/vint.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/sontag/vint.htm) (accessed April 11, 2011), Norman T. Newton, *Design on the Land*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1971, 535-536.

<sup>v</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, “Lookout Instructions, Introduction,” *Lookout Manual*, 1940, 1. GRSM Park Library.

<sup>vi</sup> Marty Davis, *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, “Vista is reopened in Great Smokies,” July 14, 1995.