

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Dickinson Hill Fire Tower

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number Fire Tower Road

☐ not for publication

city or town Grafton

☐ vicinity

state New York

code NY

county Rensselaer

code 083

zip code 12082

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. ☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.

Ruth Purpont
Signature of certifying official/Title

3/14/11
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. ☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

☐ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the
National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the
National Register.

☐ removed from the National
Register.

☐ other, (explain:) _____

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower

Name of Property

Rensselaer County, New York

County and State

5. Classification**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☐ private
☐ public-local
☒ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- ☐ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☒ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
0	0	buildings
1	0	sites
2	1	structures
0	0	objects
3	1	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

0

6. Function or Use**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

CONSERVATION/fire observation tower

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

NOT IN USE

7. Description**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

NO STYLE

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls

roof

other frame: metal: stairs and landings: wood

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

The Dickinson Hill Fire Tower is located in a clearing of land on the top of Dickinson Hill, 1,724 feet above sea level, on the northern slope of the Rensselaer Plateau in the town of Grafton, Rensselaer County. It is on a rectangular 12-acre parcel east of Grafton Lakes State Park. The nominated structure is a sixty-foot tall (to the bottom of the cab), steel-frame fire viewing tower erected in 1924. The tower is accessible from Fire Tower Road and is surrounded by open land and woodland. Also on the site is a non-historic microwave relay tower that is operated by the New York State Police. The Dickinson Hill Fire Tower is the last remaining fire tower in Rensselaer County. Since the tower has not been in use for over 30 years, it remains in stable condition, but deterioration is evident. This nomination includes two contributing structures (fire tower and a concrete water tank), one contributing site (foundation of the observer's cabin), and one non-contributing structure (microwave relay tower).

Fire Tower Road is a dirt road that is reached from New York State Route 2 via North Long Pond Road on the west and Babcock Lake Road on the east. North Long Pond Road extends north of Route 2 through Grafton Lakes State Park. The section of Fire Tower Road in the park is now maintained as a trail until it exits the park near the access road to the tower. From Babcock Lake Road, Fire Tower Road is maintained for vehicular use, as there are several year-round residences along the road, including a mid-nineteenth century former farmhouse. The access road to the tower winds several hundred feet up a steep wooded slope to the summit of Dickinson Hill. The summit is partially open but somewhat overgrown. Near the tower is the observer's cabin site, water tank, and the large microwave tower, along with an electric transmission line.

The tower was prefabricated by the Aermotor Company of Chicago, once the leading manufacturer of self-oiling windmills. Adaptation of windmill towers into fire towers was a common practice in the West and in New York State by 1924. The popularity of this practice stemmed from the ease with which the windmill towers could accommodate the lookout enclosures necessary for fire patrols. Instead of placing the windmill on the upper stages of the tower, an enclosed steel structure, a cab, was set on top of the tower.

The structure at Dickinson Hill consists of a square steel cab atop a riveted frame of angular steel, set into poured concrete footings. The cab is about seven-foot square, with a hip roof and has window openings on the upper half of each side, now without sash and glass. There is no equipment remaining in the cab. Steel framed stairs with wood treads divided into eight landings, also made of wood, provide access from the ground to the observation cab. The stairs were constructed in a "scissor" plan, with stringers fabricated from trussed bar stock and angle iron railings. The frame itself is made of a heavy-gauge steel that includes angle legs, angle struts, bar stiffeners and hangers. The frame is in good condition although some of the floor boards and windows in the cab are missing. The observer's cabin, which was built in 1929, was apparently destroyed by fire sometime after 1972. The concrete front step and partial stone foundation remain, as well as the adjacent square concrete water tank.

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower

Name of Property

Rensselaer County, New York

County and State

8 Statement of Significance**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria considerations

(mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References**Bibliography**

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

conservationengineering**Period of Significance**1924-1961**Significant Dates**1924**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A**Cultural Affiliation**N/A**Architect/Builder**Aermotor Company**Primary location of additional data**

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository: _____

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 1

The Dickinson Hill Fire Tower is significant under Criterion C in the area of engineering and under Criterion A in the area of conservation as a representative example of an early 20th century prefabricated fire observation tower in New York State. Manufactured by the Aermotor Company of Chicago and erected in 1924 by the New York State Conservation Commission, the tower was one of more than 100 built by the commission after 1908 to identify fires and put them out before they caused extensive loss of forest, open land, buildings, and wildlife. Recently acquired by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, the tower, which has not been manned since 1972, has suffered from neglect and vandalism; however, the Friends of Grafton Lakes State Park are undertaking its restoration so that it can be enjoyed by visitors to the park.

The area of the present-day town of Grafton was part of the Manor of Rensselaerwyck, the vast holdings of the Van Rensselaer family, who charged annual rents to residents of their land. After the American Revolution, the area began to be settled by New Englanders and the town was established in 1807. Although the town had over 2,000 residents by the mid-19th century, its population remains approximately the same today and it retains an overall rural character.

Forest fires have long been a threat across New York State and in the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve, it became a more serious problem as logging increased at a fast rate in the late 19th century. Logging methods stripped the forest land and left dead debris on the forest floor that would dry out and become flammable. As trains stretched into the wilderness areas, sparks from steam locomotives added to the danger of fires. In 1903 and 1908, both drought years, there were devastating fires in the Catskills and Adirondacks that destroyed thousands of acres of forest. As the State of New York became responsible for more and more land in the preserve, it decided to develop a network of manned fire observation towers, so that fires could be detected early and hopefully extinguished quickly. (Many private preserves in the Adirondacks already had fire protection methods in place.) In 1909, the Conservation Commission's Forest, Fish and Game Commission began to systematically install fire observation towers in the Adirondacks and Catskills. After a few years of using a variety of wood and steel towers, the commission chose the standardized steel towers made by the Aermotor Company of Chicago, which had zig-zag staircases within the superstructure and small cabs on the tops of the towers to provide some protection from the weather for the fire observer. The height of the fire tower was determined by elevation, view obstructions, and weather conditions. Cabins to house observers, who often needed to be on stand by or had long distances to hike, were built near most of the towers.

Once the need for fire protection outside of the forest preserve was identified, fire districts were established and towers were erected in these areas. The Dickinson Hill Fire Tower is in what was called the Eastern Fire District, which was established in 1921 and included Rensselaer, Washington, and Columbia counties. In 1922-23, the first of two fire towers in Rensselaer County was erected on Number Seven Hill in Stephentown. This tower was identical to Dickinson Hill and has since been removed. Some of the city of Troy's water supply

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceDickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer County, New YorkNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 2

was in Grafton (in what is now Grafton Lakes State Park and the nearby Tomhannock Reservoir) so, in 1924, the city subscribed \$1,000 toward the expense of establishing a fire station in order to prevent fires in the woodlands surrounding the water supply. The site chosen, Dickinson Hill, was one of the highest points in the town, and a 360-degree view could be had from the tower.

In 1924, the year the Dickinson Hill tower opened, 45 fires were reported by the first fire observer and 660 people visited the tower. In 1929 a cabin (no longer extant) was built for the observer near the tower. The tower was in service between 1924 and 1972 during the late spring, summer, and early fall and had 11 observers over its history:

Name	Starting Salary	Period of Service
William Klaus	\$90.20 month	June 2, 1924-Nov. 4, 1940
Glenford Simmons	100.00 month	April 5, 1941-Nov. 14, 1941
Charles Simmons	100.00 month	April 13, 1942-Sept. 10, 1942
Elsie Simmons	100.00 month	Sept. 11, 1942-Oct. 31, 1942
Helen L. Ellett	100.00 month	April 10, 1943-Oct. 1953
Frank A. Babcock	172.50 month	April 1954-Sept. 1954
Geraldine G. Lewis	214.47 month	Apr. 16, 1955-May 31, 1955
Thyra O'Brien	214.47 month	June 16, 1955-Nov. 7, 1956
Robert C. Forbes	110.22 bi-weekly	May 1957-Oct. 1958
Helen L. Ellett	122.09 bi-weekly	April 1959-June 4, 1965
Irma E. Maxon	139.18 bi-weekly	June 5, 1965-Nov. 11, 1972

Normally, fire observers were men, so it is quite unusual that five women worked at Dickinson Hill, although some had very short stays. Helen Ellett is the most well-known observer, working there for a total of 16 years. She was not the first woman fire observer in New York State, but she was one of several who were hired during World War II, when many observers were off to war. She lived in Grafton, about eight miles away, with her husband, daughter, and parents when she wasn't on duty. When she was at the tower, she normally worked a six-day week, eight hours a day, with Fridays off. If the season was particularly dry, she would work every day and longer hours. She would then stay at the cabin near the tower. If it rained, she could take a day off. She brought supplies in by truck but usually rode one of her horses from Grafton to work. Along with the horse, she was kept company by her dog and, for a short time, a pet raccoon. Often her husband and daughter stayed with her in the cabin on weekends. In 1965, she wrote about her experiences as a tower observer in an article entitled "Sitting on Top of the World." An excerpt follows:

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 3

As I sit in Dickinson Hill Fire Tower, high above the tall tree tops, I am reminiscing on May 1943, when I made my first trip up these 81 steps into the tower as a Forest Fire Observer. All able men were either in service or in defense plants; and Dickinson Hill was observerless. I applied for the job, as the outdoor work appealed to me and I knew the surrounding territory pretty well. When my appointment came, I was granted a release, from winding coils for airplanes in the defense plant, and took to the hills. At that time I was 29 and Connie, my daughter, was 8. We lived about 8 miles from the tower and my only transportation there was to ride one of my mares, Ginger or Rusty. I was thrilled with the thought of the nice brisk ride every day, which was not all that thrilling when a storm came up or it turned cold and snowed and I had to ride 8 miles to reach home.

The first day I was in the tower the ranger showed me how to squint across an alidade to locate smoke and pointed out some of the landmarks. He showed me how to locate the nearest warden or ranger to any distant smoke and have him investigate the fire. The next day I was all alone on the job and admit the 81 steps seemed like Jacob's ladder going to heaven. I thought I would never make it. If I hadn't looked down, I would not have minded the climb. I finally reached the top and tried to open the lock with one hand and to hang on with the other; I have never looked but I would not be surprised if my fingers left imprints on the steel railing. That was a long time ago. After a few trips up and down I didn't mind at all. I have spent many hours in the tower since then.¹

In 1968, the city of Troy sold the Grafton Lakes and surrounding watershed to the state and a state park was established there.

The Dickinson Hill Fire Tower is one of 102 fire towers erected by New York State. About half of these survive. Eighteen have been listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places, 15 in the Adirondack and Catskill preserve, two in state parks (Sterling Forest and Allegany state parks), and one in Dutchess County (Mt. Beacon). The Dickinson Hill Fire Tower was one of 30 Aermotor 60', model LS40 prefabricated fire towers purchased and erected by New York State. The steel towers are described in the Multiple Property

¹ In 1965, the last year of Helen Ellett's tenure, she reported nine fires and 209 visitors to the tower.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 4

Documentation Form for the Fire Observation Stations of the New York State Forest Preserve.²

The derrick-like trussed steel tower was then (in the late 19-teens) the emerging standard used in federal and state forests; and the Commission (New York State Conservation Commission) had favorable experiences with similar and used structures at a few stations. The towers were purchased from the Aermotor Company, a leading manufacturer of self-oiling windmills then based in Chicago. Since first being introduced in the 1890s, prefabricated steel towers had been widely exhibited at exhibitions and state fairs, and were common landscape features in the West, where they were used to pump water for farmsteads. The windmill towers were easily adaptable to their new purpose and site conditions. The upper stages, which carried the windmill, were left off and replaced by an enclosed steel cab measuring approximately 7' square. Heights were adjustable by adding standard truss sections to the bottom. Models built with different gauges of steel and special connections were available to suite wind and ground conditions. At the base, the angle iron legs held by patented foot clamps were anchored directly to the exposed ledge by countersunk rods or raised on concrete leveling piers. The structures ordered in 1916 were designed for use without stairs. Many were additionally tied down with guy wires. The standard model LS-40 structures used in subsequent years were constructed with heavier members to accommodate the added weight of steel staircases with wood treads.

The Dickinson Hill Fire Tower is one of approximately 20 fire towers remaining outside of the New York State Forest Preserve. Improvements in fire control, labor costs, and other factors led to the closure of more than half of the state fire towers in 1971 and all of the towers by 1990. Many of those in the forest preserve were removed and there were plans to remove more, but many citizens have rallied to preserve the remaining ones as historic landmarks that can enhance hiking experiences and provide information about the history of the communities in which they are located. The Dickinson Hill Fire Tower was transferred to the New York State Police, which had no use for the tower itself; and in 2010 it was transferred to the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. It is now part of Grafton Lakes State Park, and the restoration of the tower has begun under the auspices of the Friends of Grafton Lakes State Park.

Although the tower continued in operation until 1972, its significance after that time was not of exceptional importance; thus, the period of significance ends at 1961.

² The Dickinson Hill tower was not added to that nomination because it is not located in the forest preserve.

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower

Name of Property

Rensselaer County, New York

County and State

10. Geographical DataAcreage of property 12 acres**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	18	629766	4739278
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2	18	629830	4738876

3	18	629690	4738854
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4	18	629641	4739232

☐ See continuation sheet**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared Byname/title contact: Kathleen LaFrank, National Register Coordinator - see continuation sheetorganization New York State Historic Preservation Office date March 2011street & number Peebles Island State Park, Box 189 telephone 518-237-8643 x 3261city or town Waterford state New York zip code 12188**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets**Maps**A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.**Photographs**Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name _____

street & number _____ telephone _____

city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 1

Anderson, George Baker. *Landmarks of Rensselaer County, New York*. Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1897.

Ellett, Helen. "Sitting on Top of the World." 1965.

Former Fire Lookout Sites Register.

<http://www.foretower.org> (14 January 2011).

Gibbs, Richard E. "Restoration of Dickinson Hill Fire Tower." 1999.

Haynes, Wesley. Fire Observation Stations of the New York State Forest Preserve National Register Multiple Property Document Form. 2001

Heald, Edward T. *Taconic Trails*. Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1929.

Lewis, Milton. "Woman Fire Observer 11 Years in Lonely Post." *New York Herald Tribune*. 29 June 1953.

New York State Conservation Commission. *Annual Reports*. 1920s.

Sherry, Frank. "Two Women Fire-Watchers Don't Mind Loneliness." *Record Newspapers* [Troy]
12 September 1964

Starr, Bill. "A Pictorial History of the Fire Towers in New York State." 2009.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 Page 1

Verbal Boundary Description

The nomination boundary is shown by a heavy line on the attached map with scale.

Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes the boundaries that were associated with the property during the period of significance

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 11 Page 1

Nomination prepared by:

Peter D. Shaver
New York State Historic Preservation Office
Peebles Island State Park
PO Box 189
Waterford, NY 12188

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number photos Page 1

Photographer: Peter D. Shaver
New York State Historic Preservation Office
Waterford, NY 12188

Date: 2010

Tiff Files: CD-R of .tiff files on file at
National Park Service
Washington, D.C.
and
New York State Historic Preservation Office
Waterford, NY

Photo List:

1. View from the cab
2. View of the tower from the ground
3. Detail, tower frame and stairs
4. Detail, upper part of tower frame and cab

Dickinson Hill

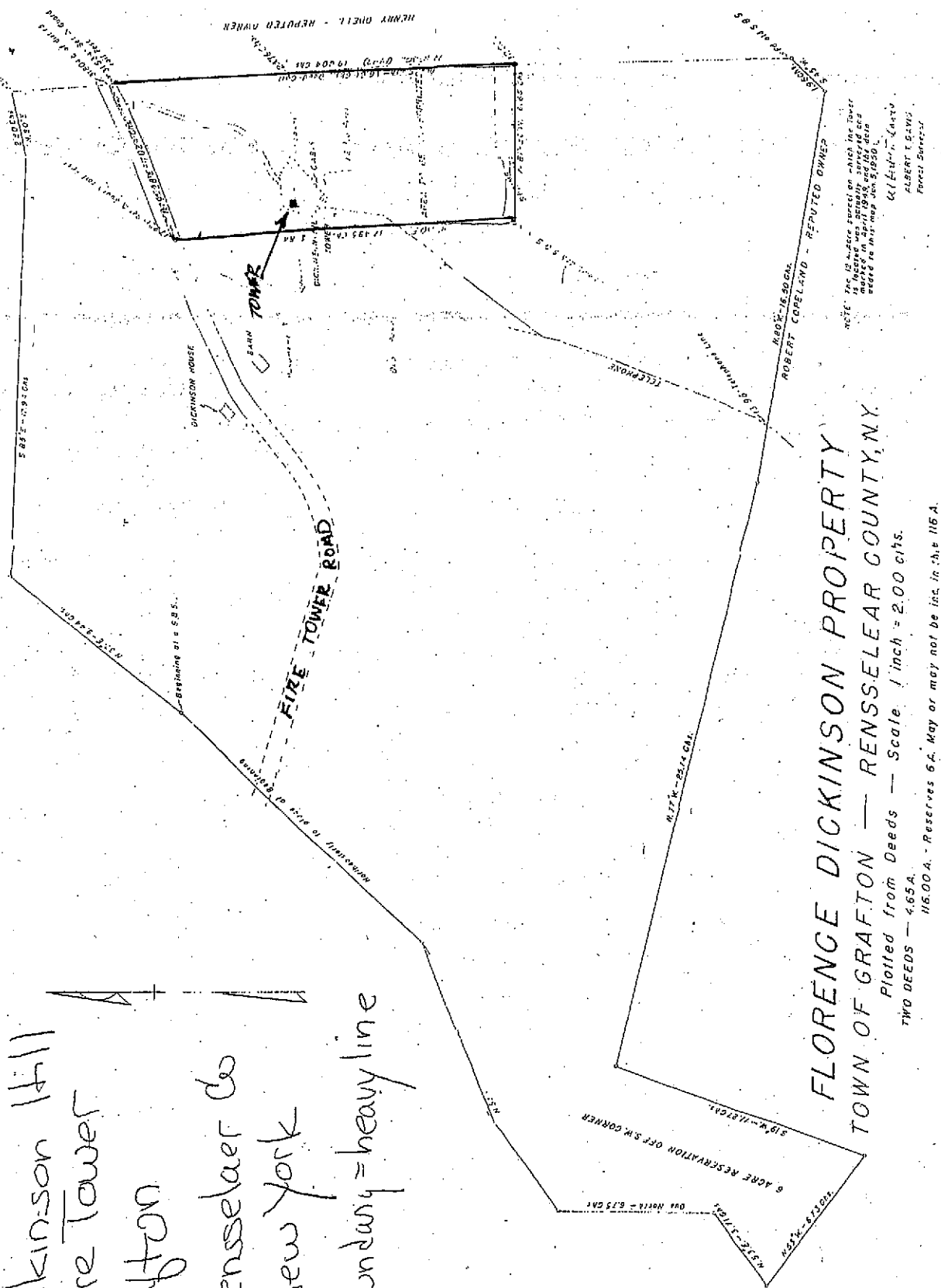
Fire Tower

Grafton

Rensselaer Co

New York

Boundary = heavy line



(NORTH POWNALL)
9369 IV SE

Dickinson Hill

Fire Tower

Grafton, Rensselaer

County, NY

Zone 18

Grafton Quad.

1:24,000

47°30'

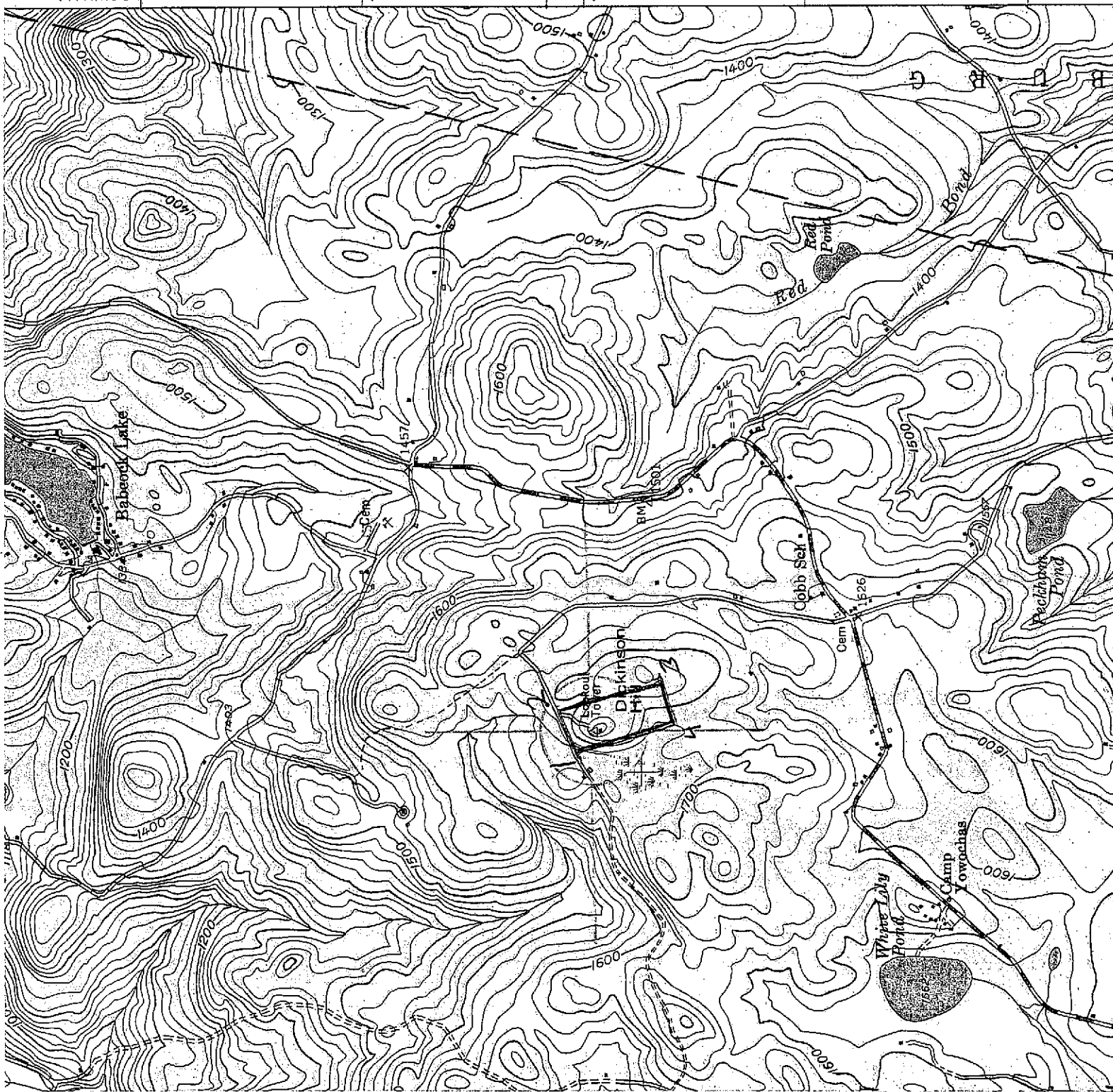
1-629766/4739278

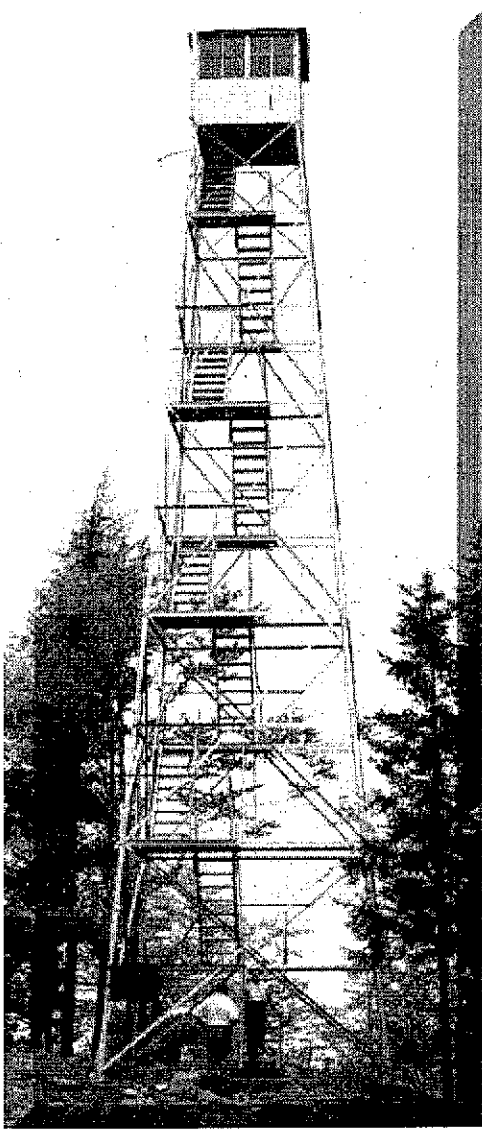
2-629830/4738876

3-629690/4738854

4-629611/4739232

47°31'



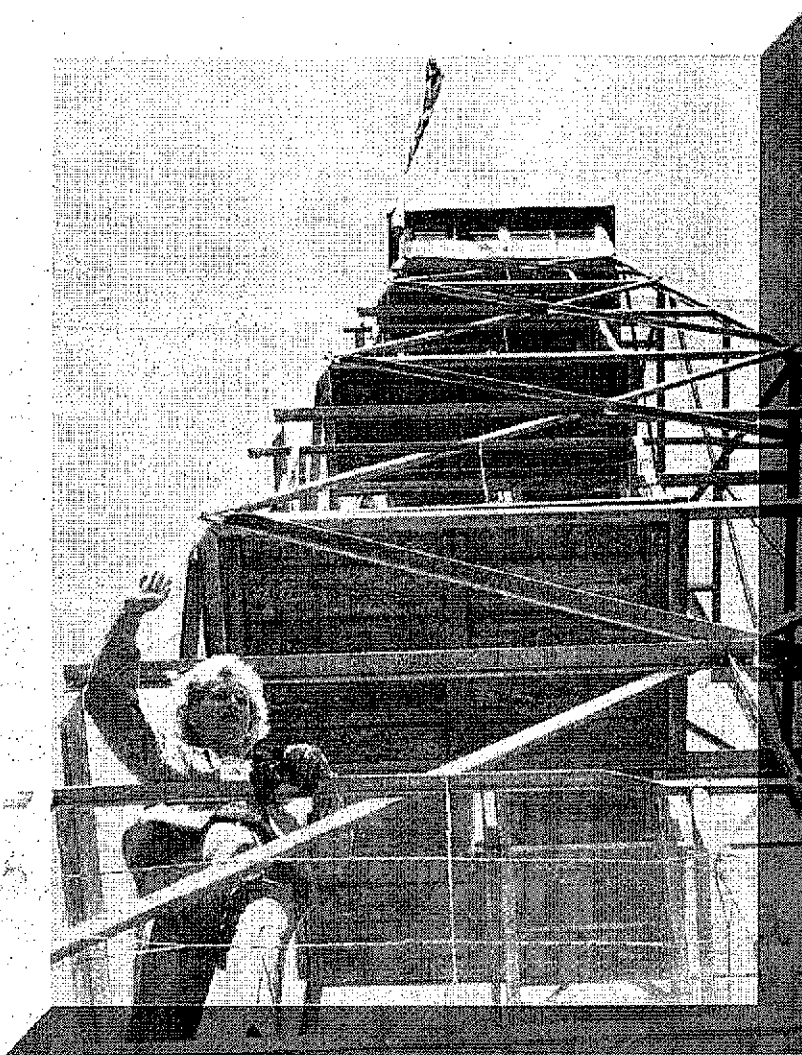


1959, Helen Ellett at the bottom of the stairs



1953, Helen Ellett in the observation cab

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer Co NY



1952, Helen Ellett on the stairs

Dickinson Hill Fire Tower
Rensselaer Co NY

