

# **The Historic Plymouth Fire Equipment Depot and Pemigewasset District Office, Plymouth, NH**

## **Historical Background**

The White Mountain National Forest (WMNF) constructed Fire Equipment Depot buildings on three of its five ranger districts between 1940 and 1942: The Plymouth Fire Equipment Depot on the Pemigewasset District, the Gorham Fire Equipment Depot on the Androscoggin District, and the Twin Mountain Depot on the Ammonoosuc District. The construction of the fire equipment depots can be attributed to three primary factors: the adoption of a more aggressive fire-fighting policy by the US Forest Service, concern about forest fire hazards in the White Mountains created by the widespread blowdown that occurred during the hurricane of 1938, and the ready availability of inexpensive Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) labor for construction projects on the WMNF.

In 1935, the US Forest Service implemented a nation-wide fire policy emphasizing the rapid suppression of all forest fires, known as the "10 AM Policy." The policy stated that forest fires should be under control by ten o'clock in the morning on the day following the report of a fire, and that if a fire escaped control, plans would be made to control it by 10 AM the next day, and so on until it was put out. This aggressive, rapid-response firefighting policy required that fire-fighting equipment and vehicles be available for quick deployment.

The hurricane of September 21, 1938 downed an estimated 175 million board feet of timber on the White Mountain National Forest. A massive salvage and clean-up effort was launched, and large sections of the forest were closed to public use due to the potential for large scale forest fires from such a large quantity of dead wood. The assessment of need for the Plymouth Fire Equipment Depot in 1941 includes a statement about the desirability of concentrating fire equipment in a central location on the district due to increased fire risk after the hurricane, and also mentions that available Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) manpower for fire suppression was dwindling. There was a desire to move fire equipment out of CCC camps, as the CCC program began to draw to a close with US engagement in World War II, and to centralize it near a large source of manpower; in this case, the town of Plymouth.

The Civilian Conservation Corps was established in 1933 as a relief program for young unmarried men during the Great Depression. Among other tasks, CCC enrollees built fire lookout towers, installed phone lines to fire towers to improve reporting and communication, built fire roads and fire breaks, and cleared debris to reduce fire hazards, significantly expanding forest service fire detection and suppression capabilities and infrastructure. CCC labor was inexpensive in comparison with skilled labor, and the Plymouth Fire Equipment Depot was built rapidly in the early months of 1942 to take advantage of it before the dissolution of the CCC later that year. The Plymouth Equipment Depot is believed to be the last building built by the CCC in New Hampshire.

## **Property History**

A 0.7 acre lot on Highland Street in Plymouth was purchased by the White Mountain National Forest in 1941 with the intention of locating the fire equipment depot there. Historical research shows that this area of Plymouth, known as Ward's Hill, was one of the first areas settled by Euro-Americans after the

founding of the town in 1763. Arthur Ward farmed the Highland Street property, which was sold by his widow, Hannah Ward, in 1882. The Tenney family owned the property and operated the 38 acre farm in the 1880s until about 1910. The property then went through a series of owners who either rented it out or lived on it part time. The land continued to be farmed during this period. Percy M. Ayer acquired much of the farm around 1930, and began selling it off in pieces, including the 0.7 acre lot sold to the WMNF.

### **Historic Buildings**

The Plymouth Fire Equipment Depot is a one-and-a-half story side-gable wood-framed building. Built between November 1941 and April 1942, it was built in the vernacular style of the day, with almost no ornamentation. The building design was based on a standard Forest Service plan, and the labor to construct the building was provided by CCC enrollees based at Camp Thornton, located in West Campton. The building is situated perpendicular to the street, its primary façade facing southeast, with three overhead garage doors, which are 1963 replacements of the original folding doors. The building is sheathed in wide clapboards with no corner trim, and originally had a cedar shingle roof. The first floor was originally divided into two rooms: a garage and a workshop. The upstairs attic space was designed to store heavy fire equipment with reinforced rafters, an upgrade from the original design, and a “scuttle” trap door in the floor with a crane system to lower heavy loads from the storage area to the vehicles below for rapid deployment.

The Plymouth Fire Equipment Depot stood alone on the Highland Street property for twenty years until 1962, when a small ranch style office building was built on the front of the lot facing the street. The Pemigewasset District Ranger’s office, formerly located in rented space in downtown Plymouth, was based on the property from 1963 until 1987. The five-room office building has no ornamentation, is clad in wide clapboard, and has an asphalt shingle roof. Office buildings of the same design were built by the WMNF during the 1960s in Conway for the Saco Ranger District and in Gorham for the Androscoggin Ranger District, though they were not co-located with fire equipment depots. The Conway building, renovated and expanded, is still in use today as the Saco Ranger Station. During the 24 year period that the district ranger’s office was based at the site, the equipment depot served as the headquarters for the district’s seasonal workforce, was expanded with an addition on the south end to provide additional workshop space (1967), and original workshop space at the north end was converted into overflow office space for permanent district employees (1976-1980). The equipment depot continued to serve as general storage space, as well as storage for enough fire equipment to outfit a 20 person crew. A small oil storage house was constructed in the southern corner of the property in 1977.

Pemigewasset District employees moved to a rented building in Holderness in 1987, and in 2009 to the current Forest Service building in Campton. The Highland Street office building has stood vacant since 1987, with occasional use as temporary housing for seasonal employees. The fire equipment depot continued in use for equipment storage and workshop space, though the need for rapid fire mobilization diminished over time as the threat of forest fires was reduced through removal of debris, forest regeneration, fire prevention education and awareness, and aerial fire detection. By 2014, the WMNF

no longer had a use for the buildings, and they were sold to the New Hampshire Department of Safety for use as an administrative site.

The Plymouth Fire Equipment Depot is historically significant as a well preserved depot for forest firefighting equipment and vehicles built by the United States Forest Service. The Plymouth depot represents the federal government's land conservation approach and forest fire suppression policy of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and reflects local response to the fire threat created by the hurricane of 1938. The construction of the building by the Civilian Conservation Corps reflects the active role of the CCC in both the Forest Service's fire suppression program, and the construction of White Mountain National Forest facilities. There are few existing structures that represent firefighting in the White Mountains, which was a significant part of the conservation movement in the era of widespread forest fires in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a major activity for the White Mountain National Forest during its early history.

The 1962 office building contributes to the historic significance of the property in that it represents the evolution of the site from fire equipment depot to administrative site, and is largely unchanged from its original appearance. It is the best remaining example of a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century US Forest Service administrative building in New Hampshire. During the period from 1962 to 1987, the office building and fire equipment depot served together as the core administrative site for the Pemigewasset Ranger District.

**References:**

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2000 New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources Individual Inventory Form for Gorham Fire Equipment Depot (NHDHR Inventory #GOR0001).

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1906 *History of Plymouth New Hampshire*. Cambridge, MA: The University Press.

WMNF Lands Acquisition Files, Campton, NH.

***[Captions for Photos]***

***P1000748: The Plymouth Fire Equipment Depot and office building, view toward Highland Street.***

***P1000722: Trap door for lowering fire equipment to vehicles below, second floor of Fire Equipment Depot.***

***PlymouthOffice: Front of Pemigewasset District office building, 1962-1987, viewed from Highland Street.***