

Uncle Roy's Tower

A Legacy in Stone Watching Over Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts

By Susanna Minton Graham

Whenever I return to New England, I feel an internal magnet pulling me to the place I find solace and quietude, to the place I spent my childhood summers amidst the rolling hills of western Massachusetts. The picturesque village of Shelburne Falls is defined by the stunning beauty of the Bridge of Flowers, the cascading glacial potholes in the Deerfield River, and the 19th century Iron Truss Bridge. It also serves as the perfect view from the one hundred seventeen-year-old stone fire tower perched on the summit of Mount Massaemett, keeping constant watch over the village below.

My childhood summers were spent in Shelburne Falls. My father, a classics professor, had summers off, so we returned to my mother's childhood home, escaping the heat and congestion of suburban New York City for the fresh air and wide-open space of western Massachusetts. Our house on South Maple Street sat at the base of the granite-filled mountain.

In the 1950s, before the Route 2 /Mohawk Trail bypass was constructed, our property extended part way up the base of Mount Massaemett. As a child in the 1970s, I played in the woods behind our house, the hint of a wagon trail heading up the mountain then still present among the trees. My mind always drifted to the purpose of that wide path and I often imagined the ghosts of my ancestors wandering by while I played hide-and-seek with my sister.

As I got older, I grew to understand the intense attraction of Mount Massaemett. As far back as 1860, students from Shelburne Falls Academy would hike its slopes for an afternoon's amusement.

Young people even drove spike steps into one of the tall pine trees dotting the summit, climbing up to absorb the spectacular five-state view. Before the current stone tower, two other recreational towers stood at the top, both built in the late 1800s and



Original Wooden Tower on Massaemett circa 1891 (Courtesy of Shelburne Historical Society)



both made of wood. The first, a simple skeletal structure, burned shortly after construction in about 1890. The second, an enclosed shingled tower, was blown down in a winter gale in January 1899.



Second Tower on Mount Massaemett 1899 (Courtesy of Shelburne Historical Society)

On a visit last August, I decided it was time for my twenty-two-year-old daughter to better know her heritage. We began a hike to the stone fire tower at the summit built in 1909 - Uncle Roy's tower. Great-Uncle Roy, my grandmother's brother and my mother's doting uncle, was a stonemason and contractor in Shelburne Falls. Building the tower was a dream he didn't know he had until he started its construction.

Aside from his years at Dartmouth College from 1898 to 1902, Roy Stanley Merrill lived his entire life in Shelburne Falls. Roy returned from college to work with his father, George Gilson Merrill, a prominent stonemason in western Massachusetts, becoming the fourth generation of Shelburne Falls Merrills to enter this grueling profession.

As my daughter and I made our way up the Fire Tower Trail on the western slope of Mount Massaemett, the mustiness of decaying leaves filled our nostrils. We



carefully placed one foot in front of the other on the narrow, uneven path of leaves and slippery boulders. As we entered a world of blue jays jeering, scarlet tanagers warbling, and turkey vultures roosting above us, my mind lost track of the traffic sounds of the Mohawk Trail below. The yellow beech and black birch created a much needed canopy of coolness on that blistering day. Abundant granite boulders spit out by glaciers during the Ice Age created helpful steps along the way, allowing us to more easily ascend the sometimes steep path.



Through our beautiful hike, the pull that Mount Massaemett has on the people of the area was evident all around us. Immediately after the second wooden tower fell in 1898, the citizens of Shelburne Falls made plans to raise a stronger, more permanent structure at the summit. They held fundraisers in the form of theater performances, including a minstrel show in 1899 that raised more than two-hundred-fifty dollars toward the ultimate eighteen hundred forty-five dollar cost. Still, it would be years before they could raise funds enough for an adequate tower - one that would not be bullied by nature.

After William M. Pratt of nearby Greenfield donated five hundred dollars to the tower fund in 1907, plans took shape to build a new steel structure, able to withstand wind and fire. However, the logistics and expense of hauling supplies to the summit were concerning, so in the spring of that year the idea of a stone structure was proposed.

By August, Shelburne Falls stonemason - and my great-grandfather - George G. Merrill had won the contract to erect a stone tower for the sum of fifteen hundred dollars. Still, for unknown reasons, the project didn't start that year, nor the following. George's twenty-eight-year-old son Roy wrote to brother Philip in May, 1908 with his concerns about the project. "They are talking some here about a stone tower and I think that one will be built soon, probably this summer. It would be kind of a mean place to get materials up to."

Later that spring, discussion of the tower job continued to fill letters between the Merrill siblings, finally with confirmation that "G.G. will have the tower on his hands this summer." The project remained in limbo, though, likely due to an unfortunate accident. In August of 1908, seventy-two-year-old George Merrill was thrown from his team of horses, breaking his collarbone and suffering bruising to his head and hip. George would not be able to build the tower.

Fundraising for the project began again in February of 1909. Wanting the job to stay in the family, George's son Roy successfully bid on and won the contract to build the stone tower in spring of that year. This was a deeply meaningful project for Roy, who had lost one eye and damaged the other just three years earlier in a dynamite accident. The tower project would be his first major contract after the near fatal accident. It would also be a chance for Roy to leave a lasting legacy in his hometown. Roy's mother Emma worried about his stamina for the project, writing to her sister-in-law that summer she explained, "It is a very hard piece of work. He is very thin and his back is about broken climbing the old mountain. Hope he will be able to endure...he has wanted the Merrills to build it."

Cousin and fellow stone mason Frank Merrill, who had recently returned home to his native Shelburne Falls from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, collaborated in designing the tower. They took inspiration from Bartlett Tower at Roy's alma mater Dartmouth College, also a popular gathering spot for young people. In July 1909, with plans solidified and a team of about nine workers employed, construction began. Roy's dream to have the Merrills build the stone tower was becoming a reality.

As my daughter and I reached the summit, I realized how difficult it must have been for Uncle Roy and his team. Not only did they hike the 1.3 miles to the summit each day at dawn, but they also endured the backbreaking labor of raising the large granite blocks one on top of another under the intense summer sun.

A major concern to the tower's construction had been how to source

the granite. Roy determined early on that the stone for the project could be quarried at the summit close to the building site, then hoisted in place with the aid of a horse. Only the sand, water, and other supplies for the concrete mortar needed to be hauled to the site. The closest supply of sand was five miles away on the gentler eastern slope of the mountain, requiring the employ of four horses to haul. Other supplies and equipment were carried by horseback up the western side, then stored in a log cabin built next to the construction site.

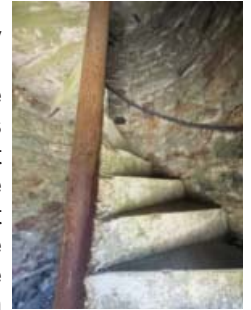
In the course of our hike, I realized that the current Fire Tower Trail begins almost directly behind the Merrill family home (now separated from it by the Mohawk Trail bypass), where Roy had grown up and lived in 1909, and where I spent those summers with the family ghosts. I imagined my great-uncle making the daily trek through the woods behind the house and then up the craggy leaf-strewn trail. His description of the working conditions demonstrated the intricacy of the project. In a letter to brother Philip that August, Roy wrote: *I am busy up in the hill making the tower. We are up now about eight or ten feet, but we will undoubtedly make better progress this week. I have had Fred Woodward drilling and [his] sons or eight other devils at work. 2 on the wall, 2 tenders, two one horse teamsters and others in quarry and other work. It is quite a task to put it up. The sand especially is pretty heavy stuff to put up the hill. But four horses are putting up about 80 or 90 hundred weight. I have bought a tent, and sleep up there some nights. I have to work pretty hard although I haven't done much manual work, I wish I could be on the wall more.*

By December 1909 the gray granite tower rose to a height of sixty feet, eight feet in diameter inside, with walls three feet thick at the base, tapering to two-and-a-half feet thick at the top. All that remained was the installation of the stairs, originally planned to be three sets of wooden steps connected by three steel-

reinforced concrete landings. With enough money instead to pay for fireproof concrete steps connected by concrete landings, Roy and his team quickly completed construction in the spring of 1910. The tower officially opened and was accessible to all as a recreational lookout by early June of that year.

With the open doorway to Uncle Roy's tower in front of us, my daughter and I entered the cooling comfort of the stone structure. Winding our way up the dark spiral stairway, the stagnant air was replaced by a soft breeze from the open windows at each landing. We gazed out the window at each level to admire a different view in each direction: the University of Massachusetts at Amherst to the south, the lush greenery of New Hampshire and Vermont to the north, the low lying Connecticut River Valley to the east, and the purple hues of the Berkshire mountains an idyllic backdrop for the village of Shelburne Falls to the west.

We stopped at the top, just below the locked square wooden fire lookout cabin, added in 1967 to replace an octagonal one that had been severely damaged by a lightning strike twenty years earlier. While the tower was originally erected as a recreational lookout, the State of Massachusetts gained permission in 1910 to start using it as a fire lookout. Later, during World War II, "watchers" were stationed in the tower high above the village to make sure that no lights were visible during blackout drills.



First glimpse of the tower from the trail



Tower without any cab - original construction (Courtesy of Shelburne Historical Society)



Tower with log cabin - after cab added - (left) Tower after present cab added - c. 1970 (right) (Courtesy of Shelburne Historical Society)

Today the oldest continually active lookout in the United States, the Shelburne Fire Tower was named in 2004 to the National Historic Lookout Register, the first step in being



nominated as a National Historic Landmark. It is currently staffed from early spring through late fall on High Class 3 fire danger days, according to Phil Gilmore, District 9 Fire Warden and former Shelburne Fire Tower observer. At 1690 feet above sea level, the granite fire tower - as solid as when it was first built - is a steadfast beacon to the community, and a reflection of the strength of its builder.

As my daughter and I lumbered down the steep western slope of the mountain, exhausted and slipping more than once on the gray granite boulders, we came closer to knowing Uncle Roy. His spirit remains there atop Mount Massaemett, keeping constant watch over the village of Shelburne Falls, welcoming visitors from near and far to his stone tower. I now return annually to my summer hometown, the legacy of my Merrill stonemason family evident in the granite buildings, old foundations, and stone walls, but it is Uncle Roy's tower at the summit of Mount Massaemett that calls to me most of all, as it does to the many hikers who visit each year.

To hike the Fire Tower Trail, drive west on Route 2 to Halligan Avenue, on the right just past the Sweetheart Restaurant. Park along the uphill side of the road.

https://www.townofshelburne.com/files/Tower_Trail_Brochure_and_Map.pdf

The stone fire tower can also be reached from the easier eastern side of the mountain by way of the Ridge Trail at Mass Audubon High Ledges Wildlife Sanctuary.