
AIR SPOTTERS OF WWII

*Bob Grigg, Colebrook Historical Society
Municipal Historian for the Town of Colebrook, CT*

During the Second World War, the government established a network of civilian airplane spotters whose duty it was to thwart any Axis sneak attack such as had befallen us at Pearl Harbor. From lonely observation posts throughout the coastal defense areas, the Army Air Forces Ground Observer Corps, numbering about 1,500,000 volunteers, maintained a vigilant and continuous watch on the skies over America to see that no hostile planes approached unnoticed. This volunteer air defense system was set up by the Army Air Force fighter command with the assistance of the American Legion and OCD [state councils of the Office of Civilian Defense] and other agencies, and established a new pattern of scouting. It remained in place until advancing technology in radar made them no longer necessary.

The town of Kent, Connecticut is credited with being the first such post in America, established on December 8, 1941, and it became the model upon which the entire program was based. The observation posts were erected on a prominent hill or any rise that offered a degree of unobstructed view. Colebrook had two such posts, one atop Panorama Hill, manned by the U.S. Army, the other at the crest of Stillman Hill, just past present day house number 33. This structure still exists in town; it is the tool shed.



Vacant land and a small hill behind the telephone company building in Hobart was the site of a lookout tower during World War II, manned by volunteers to watch for planes. After the war, this building was moved to 362 Pearl Street property and used as a playhouse for the children of William Van Buren. Photo courtesy of Jim Meagley, the Hobart Historical Society, and the forthcoming book, *A Look Back at Hobart, NY* (2013).

Everyone from high school students to senior citizens made up the cadre that manned these observation posts around the clock. Spotters usually worked in pairs, 2 to 4 hours a week, and relayed observations by special telephone to the Army Information Center; in our case, it was Brainerd Field in Hartford. On fair weather days, the spotters relied upon their eyes, and on cloudy days or at night, their ears interpreted the activity. When the observers had to rely upon their ears, the ladies might turn to knitting, and both men and women quite often played cards. There were decks of cards that featured all sorts of aircraft, both Allied and Axis, that were studied until they were committed to memory.

I recall one session when I accompanied my father to the Stillman Hill observation post that I will never forget: It was a clear day, and not much was happening. Suddenly a growl of multiple engines was heard coming from the east (directly toward Colebrook Center). Next a low flying, large aircraft seemed to emerge from the tops of the forest, which turned out to be a B-17 Flying Fortress flying at treetop level. When we first realized what it was, the aircraft was actually lower than the summit of Stillman Hill, but about the time it passed over the Center, the pilot raised the nose just enough to clear the tops of the maple trees that bracketed the observation building. The tops of these trees were lashing back and forth by the prop wash from those powerful four engines, and the noise was deafening. My father was on the phone unsuccessfully trying to make himself heard above the din. In seconds the plane vanished in the general direction of Norfolk, and he was able to complete his transmission. I doubt that he had to report that the elevation was "very low!" I will never forget the belly gunner looking down and laughing as he waved to me from just a few feet above those maples.

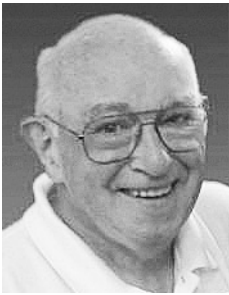
Forms were supplied on 3 by 5 cards having the following categories: Number of aircraft (one, few, many); Type of airplanes (single motor, multi motor); altitude of airplanes (very low, low, high, very high); were planes seen or heard? (check one); your observation post code name (Colebrook's was Bertram 5-7); direction of aircraft from post (N, NE, E etc.); distance of aircraft from observation post (estimate in miles); aircraft headed toward (give point of compass).

Before the card was made out however, the observer picked up the phone, which automatically connected with Hartford and reported such as this: "Flash, one, single, high, seen, Bertram 5-7, north, one half mile, east."

Of course this plane would be reported by one station after another, and the Army was able to track any and all airborne planes anywhere within the covered area.

If you were lucky, while your tour of duty was under way, someone would drop by to bring cookies or something edible.

Only one time during the course of the war did a German aircraft fly into American airspace, and that was near the end of the war when an Army Air Force crew flew a captured German plane to Florida. Of course the military knew about this, but the civilian observers were kept in the dark, just to test their proficiency. Before the plane crossed from water to land, a spotter sent in an emergency message not only identifying it as a German aircraft, but also the correct make and model.



Bob Grigg was a cartographer and information editor for Hammond, Inc. of Maplewood, New Jersey. After retirement, Bob became involved with the Colebrook Land Conservancy and the Colebrook Historical Society, which ultimately led to his being named Municipal Historian for the town of Colebrook. For the past ten years Bob has written a weekly column in the Winsted Journal under the byline "Historic Bytes." This article reprinted courtesy of Bob Grigg, the Colebrook Historical Society, and the Winsted Journal.

Flood Relief Organizations

- Blenheim:**
and
Breakabeen: { Rural Area Revitalization Effort, Inc., a non-profit at 125 Creamery Road, North Blenheim, NY 12131 (518 925-7700, rareny.org) and/or North Blenheim Presbyterian Church, Clauverwie Road, Middleburgh, NY 12122
- Middleburgh:** Village of Middleburgh Flood Relief, P.O. Box 789, Middleburgh, NY 12122
- Prattsville:** Prattsville Relief Fund, c/o NBT Bank, P.O. Box 380, Grand Gorge, NY 12434
- SALT:** Schoharie Area Long Term, 258 Main Street, Schoharie, NY 12157. (518) 702-5017 info@saltrecovery.org
www.saltrecovery.org

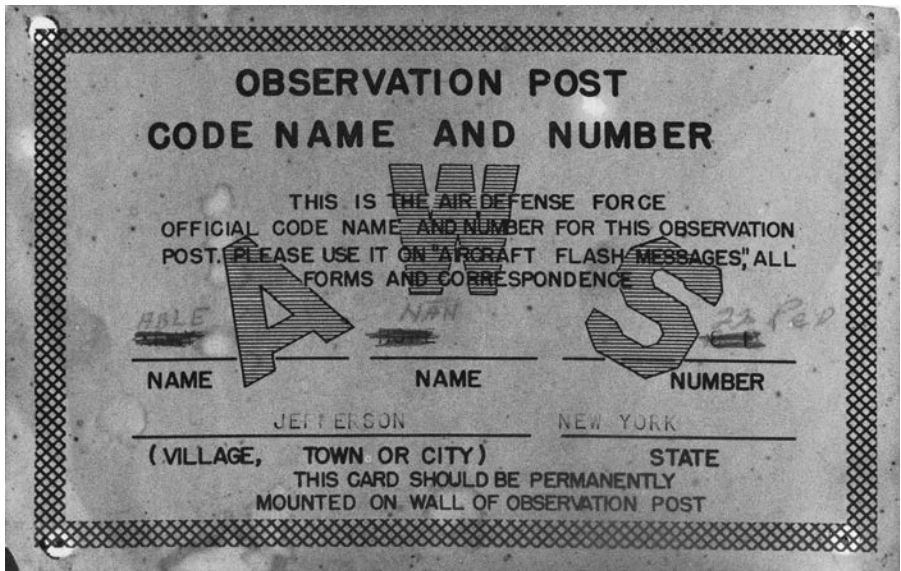
JEFFERSON OBSERVATION POST

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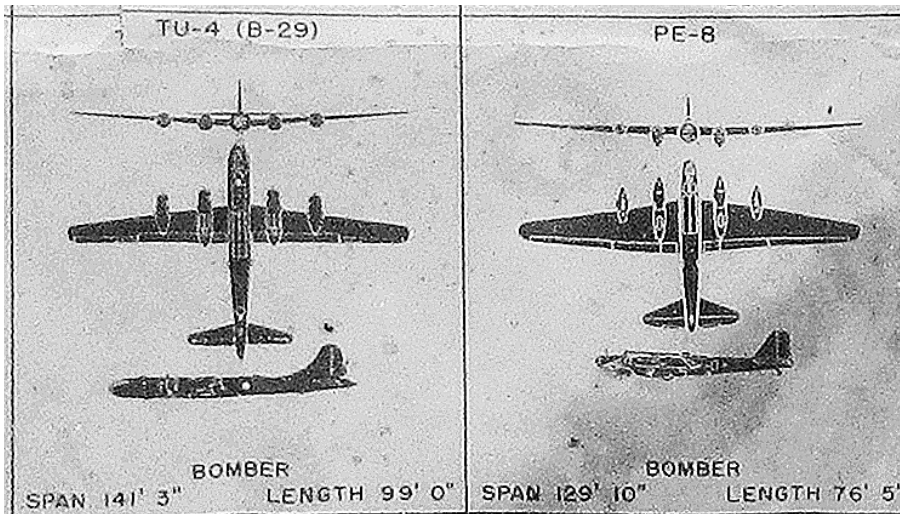
Jefferson's village green, donated by Col. Judd, has seen a lot of local history. It saw Judd start his ride to Albany to have the town named after President Jefferson, and the green was the front lawn of the first academy in the county. The Jefferson Town Green merits its state historical marker (and, possibly) a new designation as a national landmark.

Another example of the green's history: the town had been incorporated in 1803; a Presbyterian fellowship started in 1809; but its first church burned down. The green saw the replacement in 1837—a Greek Revival church on the west end that prospered for 85 years. In 1922, that fellowship merged with the Methodists who had also built on the green, but on the east.

As services were largely held at the new church, elders rented the old building to the academy for assemblies and basketball games until a new school was built around 1935. Vacant, the old church went to war: its belfry



The Jefferson Observation Post received its code name and number and was manned by volunteers throughout the war. We would like to commemorate this service with an honor roll of participants. Please contact the Historical Society or Town Historian if you know of anyone who had manned this station in the belfry of the Maple Museum.



These two planes are part of a poster used for the identification of airplanes by the Jefferson post spotters. The spotters were to sight, identify, and report all air traffic—not only to warn against attack, but also to give early warning of an air accident.

became an observer post to defend against Axis air raids, and after the war, the building was deeded to the American Legion. It served the American Legion for over 20 years, and in 1967 was sold to the Town of Jefferson.

Since then, the town has added storm windows, a new furnace, and rest rooms as well as some paneling. The building's name was changed to the Maple Museum to honor the local maple sugaring industry and housed the annual Maple Festival for several years.

The latest resurgence for the building is managed by the Jefferson Historical Society. They have presented music shows from April through October, various large-venue lectures in tune with the traditional program of a historical society, and exhibit space for vendors at the Jefferson Heritage Day celebration. The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2012, and was the object of a Main Street Revitalization grant received by the town in conjunction with the Western Catskills Community Revitalization Council.

For this grant, the Society had to raise \$16,000 in new revenues. They have now done this with the very gratifying support from the community at large, a \$6,000 grant from the A. Lindsay & Olive B. O'Connor Foundation, and most recently a \$2,500 grant from the Preservation League of New York State. This grant was one of only 25 for the entire state, and will start us on our way to restore the foundation and allow further restoration.



The spotters' post was in the belfry looking out the 4 windows.

These grants will assure that the outside of the building will be preserved, so we now have two more goals: to fully outfit the interior of the building and to restore the beautiful stained-glass windows. We have established a general solicitation fund to be used for the general appointments of the past and for future use; and we have individual dedicated funds for the restoration of each of the stained-glass windows (just as each of the original stained-glass windows was underwritten by a family, we hope that families will help to restore them as a memorial to today's families).

To keep in touch with progress on this continuing saga, or to contribute to these funds, please write to the Jefferson Historical Society, P.O. Box 34, Jefferson, NY 12093.