

# The Simple Cabin by the Lake

by Ann Green '75



“If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

– Henry David Thoreau

Katie Love '12 rotates a hand drill, boring holes for the pegs used in a replica of Henry David Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond.

It's hard work, done without power tools as it would have been in the 19th century. As beads of sweat cover her face, the Furman student keeps turning over in her mind the words of Thoreau.

He had come to the woods outside Concord, Mass., to “live deep and suck out the marrow of life,” wrote the philosopher and civil disobedience advocate who would inspire such future leaders as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

His experiment in “plain living and high thinking,” which Thoreau began on July 4, 1845, continues down through the ages.

So here is Katie, part of a class of a dozen Furman students who are spending three weeks in May reading and thinking about Thoreau and building a 15-foot by 10-foot cabin at the edge of woods flanking Furman's 30-acre lake.

“There's that passage about living life to the fullest, and that's exactly what we're doing here,” says Katie. “We're working together not only to learn, but also to do. We're working together to see a fabulous project come together.”

Katie's class was one of 37 courses offered this year during May Experience at Furman, or May X, as the students call it.

May X is optional, and it gives students a chance to try something different, something they might not otherwise fit into their rigorous academic schedules. They also can earn two hours of credit for their trouble.

Mid-May finds many college students at home, decompressing for a few days before forging ahead to summer jobs or internships. Others head to the beach, where they quickly get reacquainted with sand and surf.

The May X-ers — 346 of them in 2009 — had to delay their summer break for a bit, but they found that they reaped rewards in areas from science to hands-on journalism.

Taught by adjunct professor of English David Bernardy, the “Replicating Thoreau” class included a week of reading

*Walden* and sampling works by writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The next week the students began building the cabin with the help of Furman's professional carpenters and a mason. The final week was spent looking into possible uses for the cabin.

During the last week, the students also met with public historian D.J. Tucker, who worked on the reconstruction of slave cabins for an interpretive history project at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens in Charleston, S.C.

“In no other class will you build a cabin for a week, then decide what to do with it,” says Katie. “It's a very unique experience, and that's one of the reasons I came to Furman, to have these kinds of experiences.”

The students also kept journals of their experiences, whether stumbling upon a meaningful paragraph or feeling achy from a day of construction work.

Bernardy believes that Thoreau's message in *Walden* is particularly relevant in these troubled times, with an economic or an environmental crisis seeming to loom at every turn.

Notes Bernardy, “For many of the students, it was their

WALDEN;  
OR,  
LIFE IN THE WOODS.

By HENRY D. THOREAU,  
AUTHOR OF “A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS.”



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first exposure to the book, and I think the experience of reading Thoreau was deepened by the time they spent building the cabin.”

Katie agrees.

“I didn’t know much about Thoreau. But *Walden* is a classic, and I’m always looking to broaden my knowledge. The book was difficult to get through. It was very descriptive. But it had some great overlying themes,” says Katie, who completed her freshman year at Furman in May.

“It’s great to build something that will contribute to the campus,” she adds.

That was what Furman donor Richard Robb had in mind.

Robb is an admirer of Thoreau’s ideas and a book by Furman president David Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*.

Robb and Shi came up with the idea for the course, and Robb gave the money to buy the replica of Thoreau’s cabin, which was ordered in kit form from New England Nests.

“The first day, the frame had no nails. It was all pegs.

Everyone drilled holes by hand and pounded in the pegs,” Bernardy says. “We got more and more excited about it as we got to see it.”

Adds Katie, “It was very cool to see our work. It was instantly satisfying.”

The cabin on the Furman campus is the exact dimensions of Thoreau’s cabin, with two windows and a door. Its placement

beside the Furman lake is as near the water as Thoreau’s cabin was to Walden Pond.

Tucker, the public historian from Charleston, told the students about the restored cabins at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens and the staff’s role in setting a new standard in the interpretation of African-American history—to not merely provide information but to let visitors feel what it must have been like to live in those cabins.

Occupied from the 1850s into the 1960s, the cabins at the plantation represent eras from slavery to the civil rights movement.

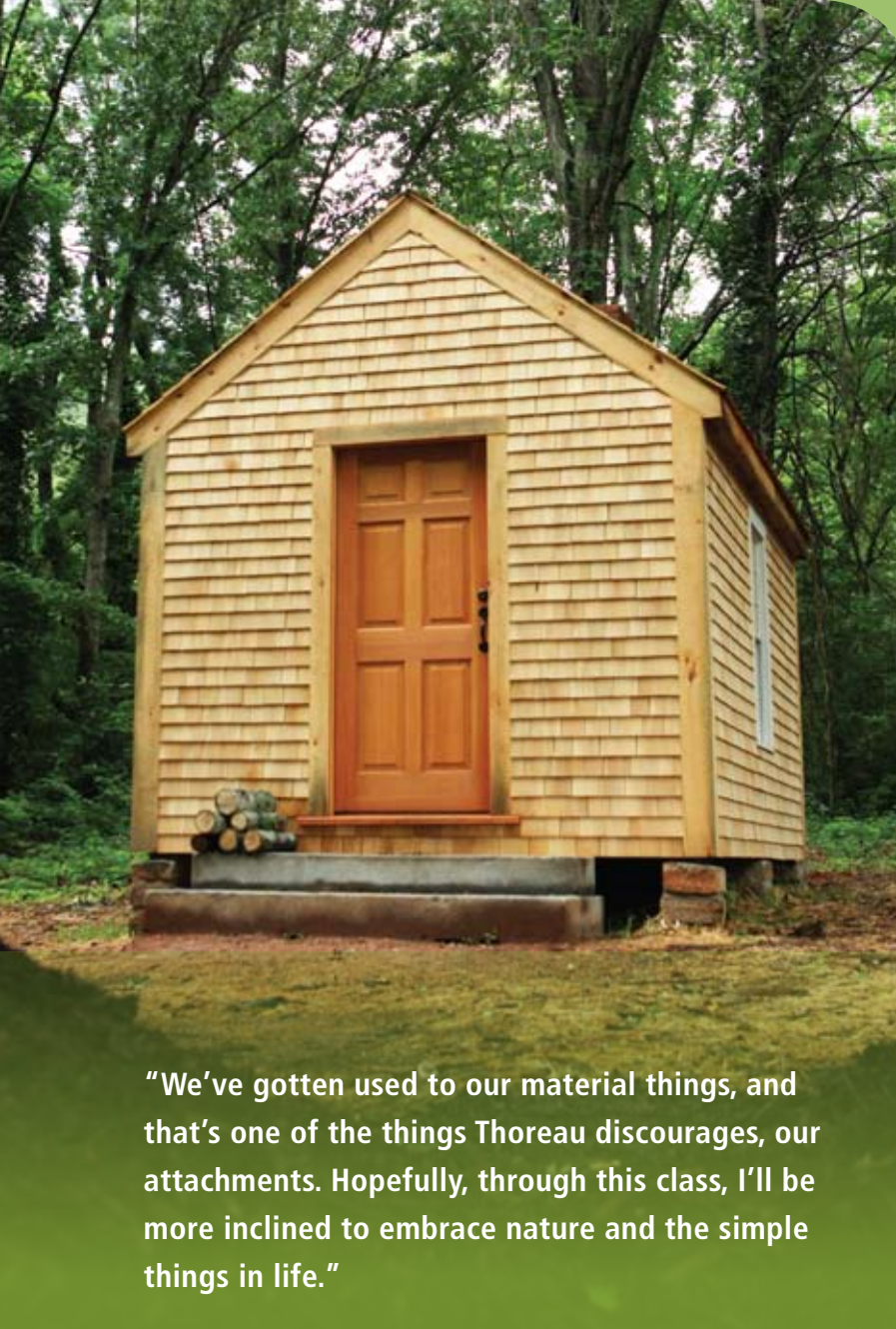
He encouraged the students to think outside the box in suggesting potential uses for the cabin they built at Furman.

The cabin will be used as a classroom for lessons from literature to protection of the environment, and there’s hope that it will be available not just for Furman professors and their students but also for the Upstate community.

“Some people joked about it being the isolation cabin,” says Katie. That’s a place where people who don’t get along with each other can go and hash out their

differences, she explains. Then they can return to their comfortable dorms and student apartments.

“As wonderful as the cabin is, I wouldn’t want to live there,” she concludes. “It’s very small. We’ve gotten used to our material things, and that’s one of the things Thoreau discourages, our attachments. Hopefully, through this class, I’ll be more inclined to embrace nature and the simple things in life.”



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## The May Experience



Things looked a little different around Furman last May. There weren’t as many students—only 346—and for many of those, Furman was on the road, studying away in, among other sites, New Orleans, Germany, Scandinavia and China.

The students that remained on campus weren’t doing quite their normal thing either. They were making documentaries, conducting neuroscience research, exploring Hispanic cultures through food, and undertaking various other projects that would not occur during the regular year.

In short, it was the May Experience.

“May X” runs for three weeks in the days following Commencement. Each student is enrolled in one two-hour-credit course, and while it can be a concentration credit or a major elective, students are free to take almost any class offered.

May X is designed to be an innovative and intensive academic experience. Class sizes are small—usually 10 to 15 students—and the cost is included in tuition.

**To find out more about Furman’s May Experience and to see a list of course offerings from 2009, visit <[www.furman.edu/mayx](http://www.furman.edu/mayx)>.**