

The simple cabin by the Furman lake

Twelve Furman students left their mark on campus during this year's inaugural May Experience, participating in a course that represents the best of what engaged learning offers.

During the first week of our "Replicating Walden" class led by David Bernardy of the English department, we read and discussed Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. This book describes Thoreau's experiment living for two years in a rustic cabin he built in the woods by Walden Pond in Massachusetts in the early 1850s.

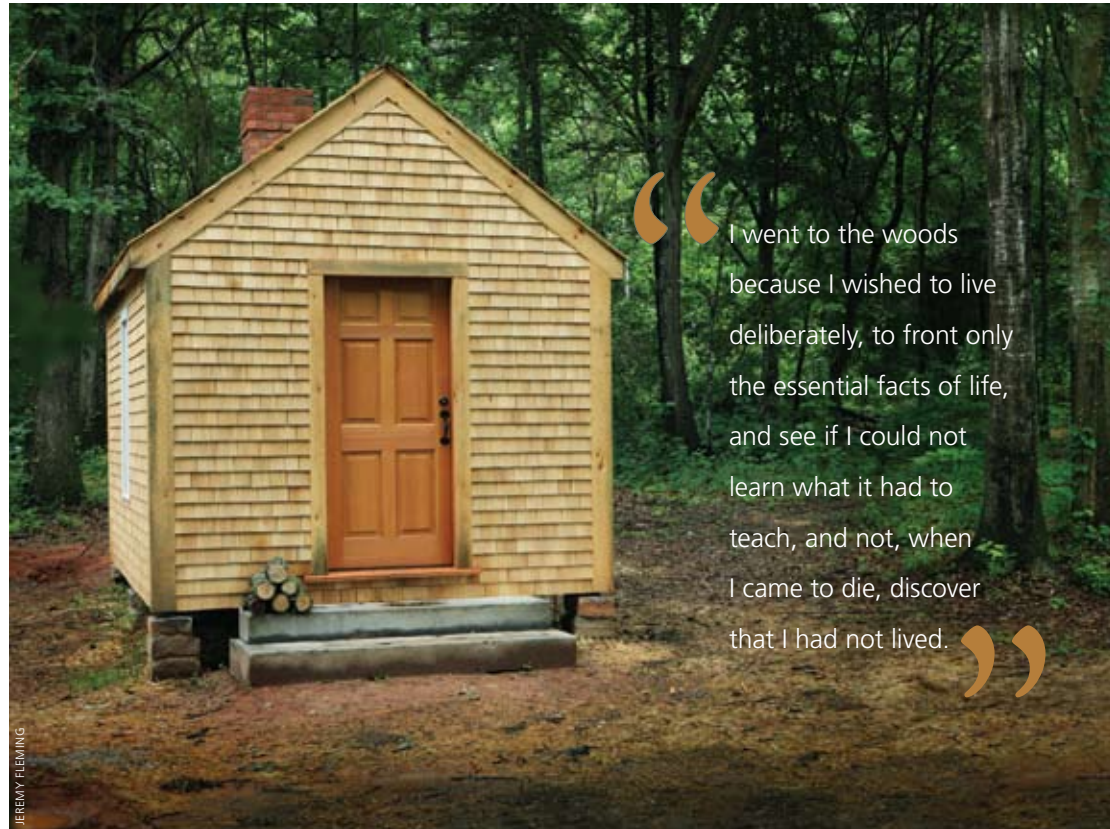
Explaining the experiment, Thoreau wrote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." By simplifying his existence so drastically, Thoreau aimed to make time to write and reflect on life and nature. *Walden* has been inspiring others to do the same ever since.

Our week of exploring Thoreau's philosophy in the classroom was preparation for what was to come. Thoreau believed that students "should not *play* life, or *study* it merely . . . but earnestly *live* it from beginning to end."

For the final two weeks of class, we lived the physical part of *Walden*. Our group, with the help of experienced carpenters from Furman's facilities services department, built a replica of Thoreau's cabin provided, in kit form, by the New England Nests company.

Each day we came together on the far side of the Furman lake to frame and roof the simple house, nail hundreds of shakes to the exterior, and furnish the inside. What better camaraderie is there than a group of students swapping Thoreau quotes amid the pounding of hammers?

As the cabin started to look less like a pile of wood and more like a house, I began to think about what it would be like to live in this shady spot and watch the surface of the lake sparkle from my front door. Could I be like Thoreau and spend a day sitting in a chair in the doorway, simply listening to the natural world around me? Could I remove the superfluities of life and



“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

instead look within myself, and at nature, for both intellectual challenge and amusement?

Thoreau created an experiment, and we were called to repeat it. In the breaks between hammering and cutting shakes, I found the need to make my own experiment — to step back and reflect on the way I live and how that compares to the way I think I should live. I do not want to live a life of “quiet desperation.” I am willing to put in the effort for enlightenment. This was an energizing revelation for me, a rising senior who is considering what career and lifestyle to pursue after graduation.

At the conclusion of *Walden*, Thoreau tells us, “I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that 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.”

We hope that by replicating his experiment at Walden Pond, we have honored his sentiments and created a place where others can visit to stop and think a moment about nature and about their own lives. “Replicating Walden” offered me the chance to think about how I want to enter into the “real” world, and for that I will be forever grateful to the simple cabin by Furman lake.

— LAUREN OSCHMAN '10

The author is a history and French major from Knoxville, Tenn.