Some have suggested that we consider putting all our efforts into digitization and dispense with saving the original documents. Digitization, however, is still primarily a way to improve access rather than a preservation tool. Paper and microfiche continue to be the archival standards. Digitization doesn’t release us from the need to preserve the original materials, some of which are unique.

We recognize that we will need to expand our digitization and electronic outreach efforts while we add space during the next two or more decades to preserve paper-based collections. The Society has already benefited from expanded electronic outreach through its blog, Peeling Back the Bark, which won Best Archives on the Web for 2009 from ArchivesNext, as well as from its YouTube channel and Twitter, Flickr, and Facebook efforts. Without question these efforts have created new audiences for what the Society offers.

One facet that distinguishes the Forest History Society from other special libraries is the staff’s focus on helping people find the information they need. There is nothing we value more than getting the best information into the hands of students of forest history, land management, and policy. There is also what I like to call the serendipity factor. Without exception, visitors to the Society end up finding materials for their research that they would have found no other way than by perusing the stacks while taking a break, discussing aspects and offshoots of their research with the staff and other visiting colleagues, and being able to put their hands on additional documents immediately when questions arise. How do we value this experience and the historical discoveries that result?

The FHS board has established a New Facilities Committee to grapple with the questions and navigate a course of action during 2011. We invite your comments and questions about the space options that should be considered, approaches that should be emphasized, and your own future research needs. Is it time for the Society, a maturing nonprofit research and education organization, to secure the state-of-the-art facilities that will meet the research and archival needs of the forest and conservation history community? Can we marshal this community for such support? Please send your comments to me at stevena@duke.edu.