have you ever been in an urban forest and had the feeling that you were off in the wild because you could no longer hear any cars? Did you find yourself on a trail and felt as Emerson did when he wrote, “In the woods, is perpetual youth”? Or have you been in a state park, turned on a trail and thought, “Geez, I’m in the wilderness!”? I can answer “yes” to all three of those questions. Here in Durham we have Duke Forest, the Eno River, and Umstead State Park to explore and escape to. I find being in the forest—and what feels like wilderness in this increasingly urbanized region—is often restorative, if not transformative.

Historians will tell you there are both legal and cultural constructs of wilderness. Although Duke Forest, the Eno River, and Umstead State Park are not, by legal definition, “wilderness,” such places do give a sense of being in wilderness. Wilderness, in all its many constructs, was celebrated on September 3, 2014, around the United States, when its supporters commemorated how the legal construct of wilderness has been protecting the cultural one for 50 years. It was on that date in 1964 that President Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act, which created the National Wilderness Preservation System, the most extensive system of protected wild lands in the United States. Since its signing, the law has continued to inspire people to protect wilderness and enjoy it, too.

As someone who studies the history of forests and how humans interact with them for a living—and who enjoys running and hiking wooded trails for recreation—I’ve been fortunate to spend time in and write about both legally designated wilderness areas in Montana (www.bit.ly/VFkgsa) and places that are wilderness areas in all but legal standing, like in Maine (www.bit.ly/1iuesr7). So it’s more than a little ironic that I’ve not visited any of North Carolina’s 12 federal wilderness areas. But it’s fine with me. I have Duke Forest, the Eno River, and Umstead Park, even though they aren’t on the wilderness list. It doesn’t alter my enjoyment of these places—if anything, it makes me appreciate them all the more because they remain wooded oases in this rapidly growing area.

What these local places have in common with federal wilderness areas is how they came to be protected and cherished spaces. The history of each involves someone at some point looking at the landscape, whether it was abandoned agricultural fields in need of restoration (like Umstead) or a forested area in need of protection (like Joyce Kilmer–Slick Rock Wilderness), and deciding that intervening on behalf of the public was a greater good for both the land and people.

In the case of what would become federal wilderness areas, that effort was led in large part by Aldo Leopold, Bob Marshall, and Howard Zahniser, whose story is the focus of the Academy Award–nominated documentary film Wild by Law (1991). All three men were leaders of the Wilderness Society, an organization formed in 1935 by Leopold, Marshall, and six other men to counter the rapid development of national parks for motorized recreation. The Wilderness Society supported projects like the Appalachian Trail but opposed others like the Blue Ridge Parkway because roadways like it were built at the expense of wilderness. (The tension between access to wilderness and protecting its integrity that led to the Society’s establishment is still evident today.) Zahniser, the executive secretary of the Society from 1945 until his death in 1964, carried forth the torch lit by Leopold and Marshall by writing the Wilderness Act and serving as its strongest advocate. The efforts of these and many other people have led to the protection of countless beautiful areas.

At just an hour long, Wild by Law is a great introduction to this decisive episode in American history. In September, the day after I addressed a community meeting in Idaho’s panhandle, where people are struggling to make a living in a region surrounded by wilderness, I hosted a screening of the film at the Durham County Library and a question-and-answer session. The discussions in both places reminded me that passion runs high on the issue of wilderness protection, and that the issue is and will remain a complex and contentious one, but for good reasons. I encourage you to seek out this film and then to celebrate 50 years of the Wilderness Act and all that it has done for what President Johnson called “the total relation between man and the world around him.” I also hope you’ll start visiting wilderness areas—however defined—around you.

Not only did we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act in 2014, but we also marked the golden anniversaries for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Economic Opportunity Act. They were all part of President Johnson’s Great Society program, remembered largely for the efforts to legislate social justice and economic uplift. Few recall today that Johnson envisioned the Great Society would provide, in part, “a place where man can renew contact with nature.” (‘What may be even more surprising is to learn that Johnson helped enact more than 300 environmental measures, a record that remains unmatched, according to historian James Morton Turner.) The first two laws helped protect and expand places to come in contact with nature, while the Economic Opportunity Act, which created Job Corps, meant the federal government would fund a supplemental workforce to help land management agencies conserve nature. And so you’ll find articles about all three laws in this issue, along with two book excerpts, and the usual suspects in the back.

Thanks to an anonymous donor, we can present the “Material Culture of Environmentalism” photo essay and two additional articles in color. When Forest History Today was first published twenty years ago, most historic photos—and even contemporary photos—provided to us were black and white. What qualifies as an historic image today, however, is more likely to be in color. Accurate reproduction is important to our understanding of history. If you would like to underwrite color printing of historic photos in future issues, please contact me at james.lewis@foresthistory.org.

EDITOR’S NOTE
by James G. Lewis