

Because They Said Yes

The Forest History Society has faced many decision points during its proud history. For a small nonprofit organization to make it to 75 years, though, many people had to say *yes*—even when there were obvious risks and no guaranteed outcome. But doing so has made FHS the worldwide nexus for forest history.

When a contingent from the Minnesota Historical Society and the University of Minnesota met with F. E. Weyerhaeuser at his St. Paul home in 1945, initially, they were seeking a way to celebrate Minnesota’s centennial in 1949. But the conversation soon turned to the importance of lumbering in the state and the lack of a scholarly research center focused on the history of forestry and forest products. The Weyerhaeuser family said *yes* to providing seed money to establish the Forest Products History Foundation, the predecessor to the Forest History Society.

By 1983, FHS had become a separate membership organization. And it had moved twice in search of enough space for offices and the collections: first to Yale University and then to the University of California, Santa Cruz, both chosen because FHS’s leaders wanted to be affiliated with a forestry school. Neither situation, however, offered opportunity for growth. But in both cases, staying put meant there’d be no opportunity either. Faced with a monumental decision, the FHS board said *yes* to moving across the country to be affiliated with Duke University, and then it quickly said *yes* again to raising money to purchase a small office building and add an extension

to house the growing library and archives. It was a strategic move that led to a successful relationship with Duke and its Department of History and its Nicholas School of the Environment and to opportunities for new collaborative programs.

In 1958, what started the year before as a mimeographed newsletter gave way to a print publication with oral history excerpts called *Forest History*, a name that would last until 1974, when it was replaced by the *Journal of Forest History*. In 1990, the FHS board adopted *Forest & Conservation History*, reflecting the broadening nature of the Society’s mission. In 1995, the boards of the Forest History Society and American Society for Environmental History said *yes* to merging their respective journals into a new publication, *Environmental History*. It is now the world’s leading scholarly journal in the field. At about the same time, the Society decided to start a magazine called *Forest History Today* specifically for FHS members that would offer scholarly articles written for a general audience, and to subsequently make it available to all on the FHS website in an effort to further everyone’s understanding of our forest history.

In 2010, the Society’s strategic plan identified additional space as one of its top priorities. The Society had by then occupied the same building for 25 years and simply lacked room for all its library and archival materials. For several years, FHS rented space for its own publications off site and for certain archival materials. Then the FHS board and staff said *yes* to the largest campaign the Society had ever attempted—to secure land and construct a building specifically designed as a library and archives.



To make this happen, our supporters and friends—old and new—said *yes* to providing the financial support that enabled the Society to move into its new library, archives, and headquarters in January 2019. The new building transformed the organization by providing, for the first time in its 75-year history, state-of-the-art facilities to support staff responsibilities, meet members’ needs, and serve as a springboard for new collaboration and funding opportunities. The final campaign raised \$7.1 million; the resulting building now provides the forest and conservation community with a point of pride as the center for the preservation, scholarship, research, and education in forest history.

Let me cite one more example in our history when someone said *yes* and made extraordinary things happen. The latest occurred last fall, when the FHS board approved a new strategic plan. It is not a “holding pattern” plan, but a growth plan designed to leverage new opportunities and strategic advantages. We hope that, when asked, you will again say *yes* to the vision of how the Forest History Society can help share information and knowledge among all who are interested in forests and conservation and thereby contribute to enlightening the public about the values of forests for humankind.