

# Transitions and Catalysts

**T**ransitions are part of every organization's evolution. Remarkably, since 1946, there have been only four presidents of the Society: Rodney C. Loehr (1946–1950), Elwood R. “Woody” Maunder (1952–1978), Harold K. “Pete” Steen (1978–1997), and myself since 1997. Although the length of tenures for three of us has ensured significant stability, the transitions from one to the next also provided strategic opportunities to rethink, enhance, and strengthen FHS. Each president benefited from the accomplishments of his predecessor and used his unique expertise and skills to grow and send the organization in new directions.

In brief, Rodney set the organization on a path to becoming a leading scholarly institution by focusing on the collection of archival records and building a strong foundation for publishing. Woody initiated the Society's oral history interview program, founded its scholarly journal, and inaugurated an endowment fund that would become crucial for the financial health of the organization. Under his leadership, FHS became a membership organization. Pete strengthened the oral history efforts, provided editorial direction for the Society's growing body of publications, and substantially expanded its archival holdings. He oversaw the Society's move to Durham in 1984, a decision which led to the purchase of its first building. He led the Society into the computer age, overseeing the conversion of the Society's two primary reference resources

into database format. Just before retiring, in 1996 Pete negotiated FHS's partnership with the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) to merge their respective journals and copublish the quarterly journal *Environmental History*. He also started this magazine for FHS members.

When I arrived at the Society in 1997, it was easy to expand on what had been started. FHS leadership provided a new long-range plan from which to set initial direction. The FHS Board also made clear its interest in expanding the education and outreach portion of our programs. My background in technical assistance and cooperative extension work made it a good match.

We continued to develop the Issues Series books Pete had started for a general audience to provide historical context for natural resource issues (with a new one due out next year). We also increased funding in order to morph a basic teacher's guide for the *American Forests* Issues Series book into an eleven-module middle-school curriculum. Impressed by a technology demonstration at an American Society for Association Executives meeting in 2004, we developed a social media strategy, each time adopting a platform ahead of the curve. Our first venture was the *Peeling Back the Bark* blog. Presence on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn followed. The result was a meteoric increase in the use of forest history content by FHS staff and our followers.

Continued upgrades to our computer technology and the website



also led to expanded access to forest history information for users. FHS moved swiftly from the Gopher protocol and user interface in the 1990s to HTTP and the World Wide Web. We refined and strengthened our online databases, which now provide access to more than forty-five thousand bibliographic entries in forest and conservation history, descriptions of some eight thousand archival collections in 450 repositories around the world, and thirty-five thousand historic photographs for educational and research use. All of our online information is now in a content management system, allowing one-stop multi-database searches that include oral history interviews, moving footage, maps, and U.S. Forest Service materials.

In 2016, we had the rare opportunity to create a one-hour documentary. *America's First Forest: Carl Schenck and the Asheville Experiment* traces the early conservation movement in the United States through the lens of the nation's first forestry school. Through a partnership with American Public Television, the

film has now been broadcast more than five thousand times on 387 PBS stations in forty-seven states, with an estimated viewing audience of more than five million. The film was nominated for two Mid-South Regional Emmy Awards (and won one). It remains an excellent example of the possible reach of a small nonprofit.

The Society's scholarly periodical *Environmental History* is widely considered the journal of record in the field. For the first thirteen years, the journal was produced in cooperation with ASEH out of the FHS offices. In 2009, we took on Oxford University Press as a publishing partner, followed by the University of Chicago Press in 2021. We improved the journal by adding space for an additional scholarly article, adding a Gallery section, redesigning and updating the cover and internal pages, and offering a new forum and reflective essays. During this time, FHS library staff continued providing the content for the journal's New Scholarship section, and our historian published book reviews and articles and served as a peer reviewer.

The building FHS purchased when we moved to Durham was 5,500 square feet. An addition to the library and archives was necessary yet ultimately proved inadequate as we continued to add to the Society's archival and library holdings—crucial to our mission. We never wanted to turn away valuable collections because we lacked room for them, so in the 2010 strategic plan, we made it a top priority to address our space limitations. FHS leaders and staff, working with our campaign counsel, embarked on a nine-year effort to conceive, fundraise, and build a new headquarters that would meet

our current needs yet also allow for future expansion. When we moved into the new building in January 2019, we had a 16,750-square-foot building, with double our previous library and archival space. As important, the new building provides support areas that we've never had: a meeting room that accommodates 110 people, a soundproof oral history interview room, a digitization and processing area, and a room for cleaning new collections before they enter the archives. All this was in addition to finally giving current (and future) staff individual offices—and a first-ever breakroom!

The Society is already achieving the vision it had laid out in 2010 for the new state-of-the-art building. It is attracting new collections, it is providing top-notch space for researchers, and it has become a point of pride for the national and international forest and conservation communities. It is already providing the Society a base from which to launch new programs and initiatives.

A majority of the funds raised during the past twenty-six years directly supported programs and the knowledgeable and dedicated FHS staff so critical to our success. But endowment funds were not ignored. Since 1997 we more than doubled them. New endowments focused on graduate fellowships, a distinguished lectureship, forest history publications, informing public opinion, oral history, digitization and outreach of the archives, and maintenance for the new building. Today we have approximately twenty endowments that are ninety percent restricted funds. In 2003, the Society transitioned from a membership model to an annual fund model. This helps members and supporters to think of their donations to FHS as

charitable contributions, rather than as simply membership dues. The result has been impressive. Annual unrestricted funds have increased sixfold, helping the Society retain staff and take advantage of strategic opportunities.

The Society's evolution continues: after twenty-six years at the helm, I am retiring in 2023. A committee from the FHS Board of Directors, under the leadership of Lynn Wilson, immediate past-chair, has been conducting the search for the next president. The objective is to bring my successor on board and make the transition as seamless as possible, as was done for me when I started in 1997.

I am incredibly proud of what we have achieved during my tenure, and it has been gratifying to work with the remarkable staff, board members, volunteers, partners, and sponsors in the forest and conservation community. Donors who have a deep appreciation for the value of history have made my time with FHS especially enjoyable. During this time, the fourteen FHS board chairs whom I have worked with provided exceptional leadership and gave generously of their time and energy to help me succeed: Gene Robbins, Peter Murphy, Bill Baughman, Dick Porterfield, Tom Dunlap, Larry Tombaugh, Scott Wallinger, Scott McCampbell, Michael Kelly, Hayes Brown, Chris Zinkhan, Doug Decker, Lynn Wilson, and Bob Izlar. I expect that the next president and board leaders will enjoy the same trust, commitment to scholarship and nonadvocacy programs, and an entrepreneurial approach to achieving strategic objectives as we have had. I encourage you to continue to support the Society as it heads in new and exciting directions.