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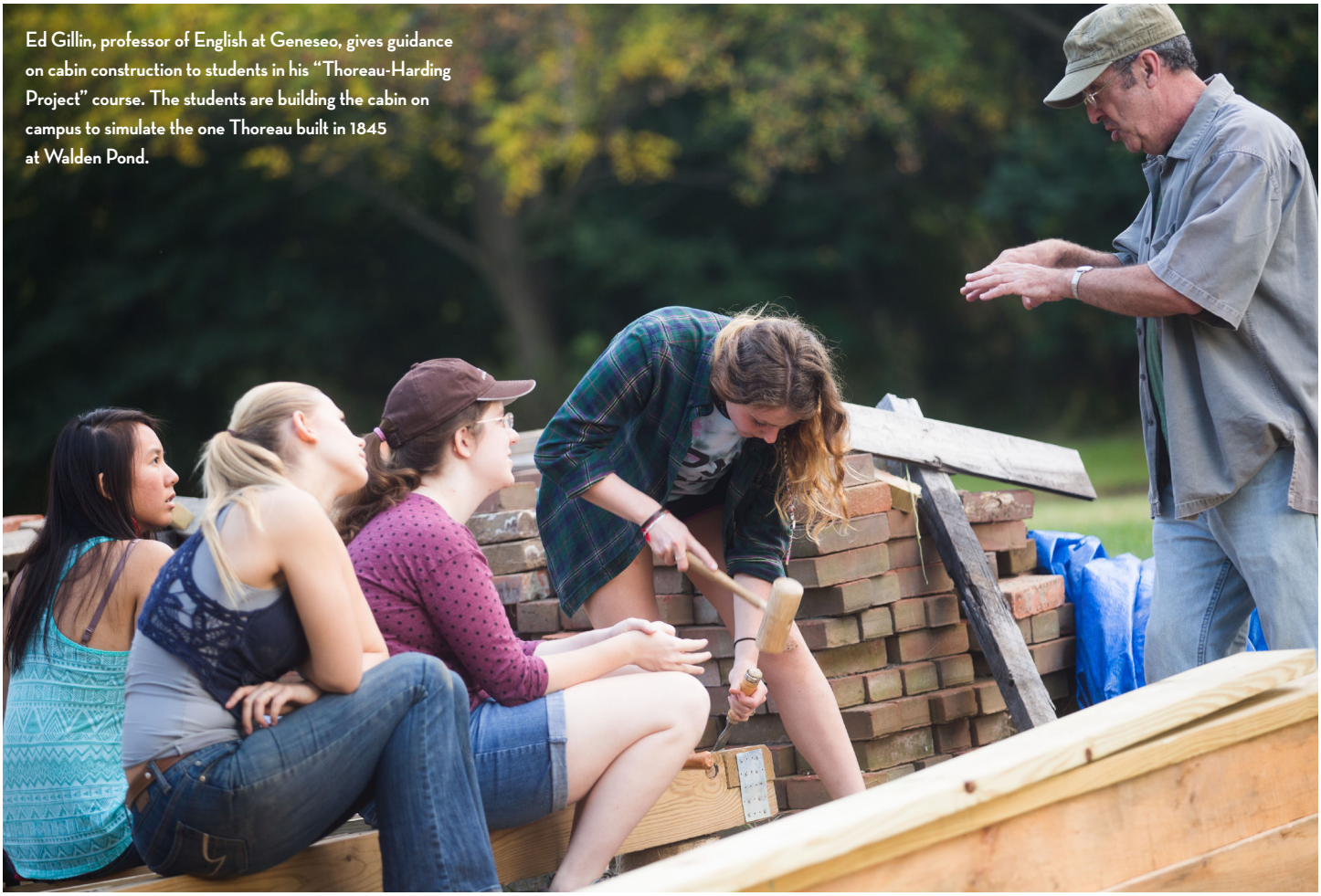
Hammer, Nails, and Software Bring Thoreau Alive



Ed Gillin, professor of English at Geneseo, gives guidance on cabin construction to students in his "Thoreau-Harding Project" course. The students are building the cabin on campus to simulate the one Thoreau built in 1845 at Walden Pond.

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By Jennifer Howard
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It's a picture-perfect late-September afternoon in upstate New York, and Ed Gillin has taken his English class outside. Dressed in baggy trousers and shirt, a straw hat perched on his head, he looks like a beardless Walt Whitman—but it's another iconic American writer, Henry David Thoreau, who's gotten the professor and his undergraduates out into the autumn sunshine.

Mr. Gillin, a professor of English at the State University of New York College at Geneseo, teaches a course called the **"Thoreau-Harding Project"**. This fall, as his students read their way through *Walden*, they aren't just grappling with the text; they're working out how to build a cabin like the one Thoreau built in 1845 at Walden Pond.

Saws and hammers don't usually figure in the literary critic's toolbox. But the hands-on approach that Mr. Gillin wants his students to take to *Walden* reflects Thoreau's belief that one should learn by doing. And it complements another project, **Digital Thoreau**—led by Mr. Gillin's English-department colleague Paul Schacht—that uses digital tools to get inside *Walden*.

Although they undertook their efforts independently, Mr. Gillin and Mr. Schacht are building a 21st-century approach to literary study. It takes a foundation of traditional textual skills, adds computer-enabled scholarship, and caps it with a belief in the educational power of building something, whether a pine-wood cabin or a digital edition.

Geneseo has a long, affectionate relationship with Thoreau. The Harding referred to in Mr. Gillin's course is the late

PHOTO BY KEITH WALTERS, SUNY GENESEO

The Digital Thoreau core development team regularly collaborates in the college's Milne Library. From left to right are Leah Root, web services developer; Joe Easterly, electronic resources and digital scholarship librarian; Paul Schacht, professor and chair of Geneseo's English Department and director of Digital Thoreau; Kate Pitcher, interim director of Milne Library; Liz Argentieri, special collections librarian; and Corey Ha, head of library information technology services.

Walter Harding, an eminent Thoreau scholar and biographer who taught at the college from 1956 to 1982. He co-founded the **Thoreau Society** in 1941 and was the first editor of **The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau**, a scholarly series begun in 1966 and published by Princeton University Press.

Building Things

One component of the Digital Thoreau project, called **The Days of Walter Harding, Thoreau Scholar**, explores Mr. Harding's life and work. That site was built by students in Mr. Schacht's "Literature & Literary Study in the Digital Age" **course**. Like Mr. Gillin's class, it uses *Walden* as both a central text and a gateway to building things, in this case with tools for digital publishing and textual analysis.

The project also includes a digital commons, called the **Readers' Thoreau**, where readers can gather virtually and trade annotations and comments in shared online versions of Thoreau's work.

Another pillar of the project, a so-called **fluid-text edition** of *Walden*, enables readers to compare the many revisions the manuscript went through from 1846 to 1854, when the book was published.

The **fluid-text** version was created as a scholarly resource but could appeal to students or anyone who wants to see how a classic work took its canonical form. "There's the notion that the author had a fixed intent at the outset," Mr. Schacht says. But authors "are discovering what they have to say as they write it."

To reveal Thoreau at work on *Walden*, the Geneseo team began with Princeton University Press's edition. Then they turned to a 1967 dissertation by Ronald E. Clapper, in which he painstakingly compared all of the revisions in the *Walden* manuscript material held by the Huntington Library, and identified seven distinct stages. Although never published as a book, the "genetic text" of *Walden* that Clapper produced has become a bible among Thoreau scholars.

"He was doing a kind of scholarship that at the time was not very popular," Mr. Schacht says. Now, thanks to the rise of digital humanities, "this kind of work has a kind of sexiness it utterly lacked in the 1960s."

The Digital Thoreau team, including Joe Easterly, Geneseo's electronic-resources librarian, took the contents of Mr. Clapper's dissertation, encoded it, and adapted an open-source display engine called the Versioning Machine to make it possible for readers to compare different versions side by side. The fluid-text edition went live this year.

Mr. Schacht and his colleagues hope that the project will keep expanding. Once the Huntington Library digitizes its *Walden* manuscript holdings, for instance, those images could be linked to the *Walden* material already on the Geneseo site.

Digital Thoreau gives readers a sense of "the energy with which Thoreau was working," says Elizabeth Hall Witherell, editor in chief of the Princeton series and a senior researcher at the University of California at Santa Barbara library. That sense is harder to get, she explains, from a standard scholarly edition that includes manuscript variants in end notes and forces readers to flip back and forth.

She would love to see the project expand to include more of Thoreau's writings, including those he never published, such as surveyor's reports and landscape notes, along with 1,800 or so pages of notes on natural phenomena. That's become interesting to researchers studying climate change, but "there's a whole bunch of that kind of stuff that nobody in English departments has ever been interested in," Ms. Witherell says.

'Extreme Learning'

The tagline of the Digital Thoreau project is "Thoreau digitized. Deliberately." That's an allusion to the passage in *Walden* in which Thoreau wrote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately." Books, he added, "must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written."

Mr. Gillin encourages his Thoreau-Harding students to read and to build deliberately. His syllabus describes the course as a prototype of "extreme learning," in which students "will be guided by the Thoreauvian principle of learning by means of practical experience."

They don't just read; they measure and design and make group decisions about each step. A faculty member who works with the U.S. Geological Survey lent them a spotting scope with a level, similar to what Thoreau would have used, so they could survey the site. They round up the necessary building materials—a local Amish sawyer hand-milled the timber for them—and have mac-and-cheese fund-raising events to support the effort.

"It's a little unconventional for an English class," says Thomas McCarthy, a sophomore majoring in English. On this bright afternoon, he and some of his fellow students are cutting postholes in the timbers that will form the base of the cabin's walls. Groups of students take turns using the kinds of equipment Thoreau would have used—no power tools or 21st-century techniques allowed.

For practical tips, the students consult many sources, online and off: how-to videos on YouTube, Tedd Benson's Building the Timber Frame House, local craftsmen, on-campus experts—and Thoreau himself. In *Walden*, the author describes how in the early spring of 1845 he borrowed an ax, took himself to Walden Pond, and built himself a simple dwelling:

> *I hewed the main timbers six inches square, most of the studs on two sides only, and the rafters and floor timbers on one side, leaving the rest of the bark on, so that they were just as straight and much stronger than sawed ones. Each stick was carefully mortised or tenoned by its stump, for I had borrowed other tools by this time. My days in the woods were not very long ones; yet I usually carried my dinner of bread and butter, and read the newspaper in which it was wrapped, at noon, sitting amid the green pine boughs which I had cut off, and to my bread was imparted some of their fragrance, for my hands were covered with a thick coat of pitch.*

As a construction blueprint, *Walden* leaves some key details to the imagination. Did the windows of Thoreau's cabin open and close? Should the students paint any part of their replica cabin once it's complete? Those kinds of questions inspire them to study the text closely for clues. As they work, the student builders talk about what they've learned from reading Thoreau deliberately.

"I'm always excited to come build," says Marisa Powell, a junior. She says the project has encouraged her and others in the class to pay closer attention, both at the building site and beyond.

Living in a technology-saturated society, "it's nice to be more present and to know where you are," says Amy Liang, also a junior.

The cabin site sits on sloping hard ground, which presents challenges that the sandier soil of Walden Pond did not. "The ground is so hard and so undisturbed that our shovels bent," Mr. Gillin says. "It took many weeks just to dig the chimney foundation. It took Thoreau two hours."

Thoreau also had fewer bureaucratic hurdles to clear. This fall is the fourth time Mr. Gillin has taught the class; it's taken successive groups of students two years to get to the point of actual construction. The first students to enroll spent a lot of their hands-on time persuading the requisite campus authorities to let them proceed.

The students first wanted to build the cabin inside the campus arboretum. Safety concerns nixed that plan. The chosen site is between the arboretum and a parking lot, so that campus security can keep an eye on it. There's no pond, but the location commands a fine view of the Genesee River Valley.

Once the cabin is completed, whenever that might be, the students hope it will become a permanent part of the landscape. "It's a way we can contribute our knowledge to the campus," says Stephanie Carelli, a sophomore.

In contending with red tape and going out into the community to find the expertise and materials they needed, "they learned all kinds of things about civic engagement," says Carol S. Long, the university's interim president. "That learning is as good as what they're learning about the text."

That's typical of Geneseo students, she says—and in line with a philosophy of engagement that the university seeks to encourage as part of its mission to keep the liberal arts relevant. Lessons in literature can help equip students for life, Ms. Long says. "They come, they roll up their sleeves, and they go to work."