



Jim and Rachel Van Eerden's "Walden"-inspired cabin in Stokesdale, N.C. Sebastian Siadecki for The New York Times

They Went to the Woods Because They Wished to Live Deliberately

Paying homage to the long-dead Transcendentalist, some people are building full-scale replicas of Henry David Thoreau's Walden cabin.

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By [Dorie Chevlen](#)

For this story, Dorie read "Walden" for the first time since high school.

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Jasper and Satchel Sieniewicz can't believe it was a one-man job.

As children, their father read to them from Henry David Thoreau's "Walden," which includes lengthy descriptions of Thoreau building his cabin at the eponymous pond in Concord, Mass., using hand tools to form beams from fallen timber and upcycling wood from a fisherman's shanty. All of it he did alone except for raising the frame with a few friends, though even this Thoreau qualifies as "rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness than from any necessity."

After building a full-scale replica of Thoreau’s cabin in the woods behind their family’s vacation home in Maine, the brothers don’t buy it. Even using a sawmill and power tools, it took them three summers of labor, on and off between school and work beginning the first summer of the pandemic, plus the help of their father, Tom Sieniewicz. Thoreau was living in his cabin in under three months.

“There is no way that he did it by himself in the time period that he said it was done,” said Jasper, now 23.



Satchel and Jasper Sieniewicz used fallen timber to build their cabin in the woods. Credit...Sieniewicz Family

No registry tallies how many people have made replicas of Thoreau’s cabin, but they exist across the country, built for private use, for writers’ retreats, for academic purposes and as Airbnb rentals. Aiding the projects, The Thoreau Society started selling blueprints of the 10-by-15-foot cabin at their gift shop about seven years ago. And at the Sam Beauford Woodworking Institute in Adrian, Mich., you can sign up for a four-week “[Walden Cabin series](#)” which teaches all the skills necessary to make your own cabin using only the tools and technologies of the time. (Axe craft gets a week of its own.)

In 1845, Thoreau moved into his one-room cabin in the woods and proceeded to live there for two years, two months and two days in significant (though not total) quietude, seeking, as he wrote, “to front only the essential facts of life.” He published his account of this experience, “Walden; or, Life in the Woods” in 1854.



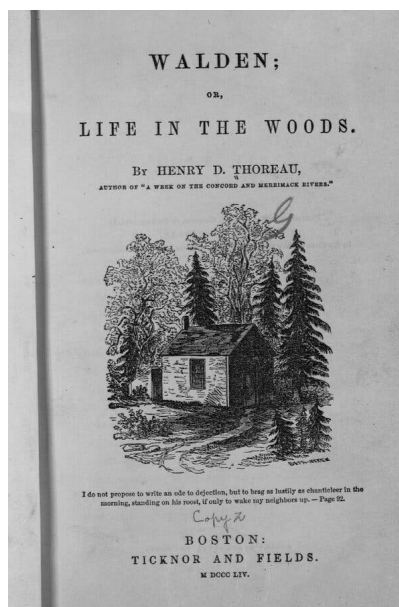
Henry David Thoreau moved to his cabin in 1845. Credit...Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Today, it seems quaint to imagine a man so overwhelmed by 19th-century society that he'd seek such extended retreat. There was no electricity back then, no cellphones, no [nudifying A.I. chatbots](#). But Thoreau's prescription for a life lived more simply, one more attuned to nature, is an enticing response to this unmatched moment of political, social and technological chaos. It's likely why his legacy has survived so long; perhaps why he's far more popular a writer today than he ever was in his own life. (The first print run of 2,000 copies of "Walden" took more than five years to sell; it has since been translated into nearly every language spoken on Earth.)

Perhaps it is also why people are building his cabin.

Building Castles in the Air

The Sieniewicz brothers originally hoped to build a treehouse, but the elder Mr. Sieniewicz, an architect, prohibited them from damaging or removing any living trees on the property, prompting a pivot: "I somehow convinced them that building Henry David Thoreau's cabin was their idea," he said.



The first edition of "Walden," published in 1854, included an illustration of his cabin in the woods.
Credit...Library of Congress, via Getty Images

The boys had visited the site in Concord with their father years prior, but admittedly, the interest in Transcendentalism was mostly his, especially insofar as the philosophy emphasizes individualism, self-reliance and a connection to nature. Still, they were game to build the cabin with his blessing, using mostly recycled materials and milling their own wood from fallen trees they found in the forest. "Give a couple teenagers a commercial chain saw, what could

happen?” Tom Sieniewicz joked. The boys picked up the new skills they needed by watching YouTube videos; the rest they’d learned as children in woodworking classes.

Not everyone who builds a replica Walden cabin takes as long as the Sieniewicz family because not everyone takes as strict an environmental approach. But like them, most have made it a group effort.



The Van Eerdens’ cabin features two framed Thoreau quotes, from the first and last chapters of “Walden.” Credit...Sebastian Siadecki for The New York Times

Jim and Rachel Van Eerden had a “barn raising” for their cabin in Stokesdale, N.C., with friends building historically accurate furniture, a contractor working on the frame, and even a blacksmith forging nails in the style of the 1850s. Their “Walden” cabin is the first in a growing series of literature-inspired structures on their homestead property, rented out via Airbnb and VRBO. The listing explicitly warns would-be visitors about the lack of plumbing, electricity and Wi-Fi; showers and toilets are available at nearby “Narnia House,” instead.

Their cabin’s interior is nearly true to Thoreau’s model, with even the dents and nicks in the wood desk matching the writer’s own. They made a few additions to the structure though. “We gave ourselves what we called the ‘third year liberty’ where we said, ‘OK, if Thoreau would have stayed a third year, he would have wanted a little front porch. He would’ve wanted a garret,’” said Mr. Van Eerden.



Jim and Rachel Van Eerden gave themselves a “third year liberty” in constructing their cabin, imagining what Thoreau would have wanted if he stayed at Walden longer. Credit...Sebastian Siadecki for The New York Times

Jeffrey Ryan had originally planned to build his cabin solo to mimic Thoreau, but he pivoted after nearly falling from an 8-foot ladder. “That’s when I said, ‘Time out, I’m calling for help,’” Mr. Ryan said. He completed the work on his cabin with the help of a childhood friend, building it in the woods behind his house in Maine. In line with Thoreau’s environmentalist ethos, he sourced used and recycled materials wherever possible — many of the wood beams were leftovers from the construction of his main house, the wood stove was a gift from a neighbor, and the antique windows were purchased on Facebook Marketplace. “I’ve stayed remarkably true to his vision,” he said. He also stayed close to Thoreau’s cost: Mr. Ryan spent \$1,670 on supplies. Thoreau spent \$28.12½; about \$1,200 in today’s dollars.

But for others, using Thoreau’s exact methods is beside the point. Kevin Klein built his cabin in the woods behind his house in Hingham, Mass. two years ago, tapping his stepfather, a master carpenter, to help. He paid a contractor to put on the roof and spent roughly \$4,500 on materials from Lowe’s. “This isn’t a strict, historical fetishization project,” he said.

Mr. Klein first became acquainted with Thoreau when he was in high school, watching “South Park.” In a Season 1 episode, Cartman wins a writing contest by plagiarizing “Walden” and Mr. Klein, curious and unfamiliar, bought a copy. It still lives on his bookshelf, and he’s read it multiple times.

Simplify, Simplify, Simplify!

Even before “Walden,” critics questioned Thoreau’s motivations for building and moving into his isolated cabin. “I think he touches a lot of nerves,” said Laura Walls, a scholar of American Transcendentalism. “What a lazy bum this guy has to be, not pulling his weight in society and isolating himself like that,” she said, paraphrasing his detractors.



The writing desk in the Van Eerdens’ cabin is modeled after the one Thoreau wrote on in “Walden.”
Credit...Sebastian Siadecki for The New York Times

But for fans of Thoreau, that individualism is the appeal, “the whole idea of leaving society behind and rebelling against industrialization and being self-reliant with hand tools,” said Luke

Barnett, whose Sam Beauford Woodworking Institute offers the Walden cabin series. Mr. Barnett was first introduced to Thoreau in fifth grade, bribed with Snickers bars as part of a reading program. “I loved it,” he said, “It’s kind of dry, let’s not lie and pretend it’s not. But the concepts in it attracted me and I reread it every few years.”

As a child, Mr. Barnett experienced periods of homelessness and came into his woodworking career after dropping out of high school. Though most of his work involves power tools, Mr. Barnett still sees the value in doing things by hand and offers his class to help empower like-minded woodworkers and outdoors people. “With just those tools, they can build anything they could ever imagine. They do not even need electricity,” he said. “Nobody can ever take that away from you. You are completely self reliant.”



A hundred years after he lived there, the original site of Thoreau's cabin in Walden Pond was discovered by Roland Robbins in 1945.
Credit...Cody O'Loughlin for The New York Times

In addition to championing self-reliance, Thoreau was an early environmentalist. Today's Walden Pond is lush with trees, thanks to a state reservation program, but Thoreau witnessed immense swathes of the forest torn down by loggers. He was among the first to decry the loss, and among the first to question the rampant consumerism which drove its degradation. An Abolitionist, Thoreau avoided sugar, which was produced by slave labor, and he wore simple clothes instead of the new Paris fashions.

To be an ethical consumer of food, clothes, shelter or even entertainment today is difficult. But a few hours alone in a simple cabin can offer some perspective. Dr. Walls explained, “The whole

point for Thoreau was a deliberate experiment in simplifying our wants — what we think we want — and trying to get to the heart of what it means to live a full life.”

The Great Ocean of Solitude

Self reliance doesn't mean hermitude. It didn't for Thoreau — while living at Walden, he regularly went into Concord for supplies, visited with friends and ate meals with his family.



The Van Eerdens modified Thoreau's original plans somewhat; theirs has a garret to accommodate more guests.
Credit...Sebastian Siadecki for The New York Times

But, he also sometimes needed a break. While at Walden, Thoreau read and wrote, swam in the lake, and spent hours in total stillness, raptly observing nature from his doorway. “I grew in those seasons like corn in the night,” Thoreau wrote of the experience.

For Mr. Ryan, his cabin offers a peaceful space just for writing. “The simplicity invites focus,” he said. He has just a kerosene lamp, a desk modeled after Thoreau's and bookshelves full of research material (to avoid using Google). “It naturally makes me not want to check email impulsively. I'm there to write.”



Jeffrey Ryan built his cabin with the help of a childhood friend (and lots of visits from his dog, Quoddy).
Credit...Jeffrey Ryan

Mr. Klein mostly uses his cabin as a quiet place to smoke his cigars. He, his wife and their four children hike in the woods behind their home and will occasionally sleep out in the cabin, using mats and blankets from the house.

The Van Eerdens only sometimes get to read in their cabin; at about \$130 a night, it's usually booked "We have literally had guests from Germany, from New Zealand, from Paris, from London, all arriving with this excitement about stepping into a book that made a mark on them," Mr. Van Eerden said. Sometimes the excitement exceeds experience; he's had to explain to some guests how to start a fire in the fireplace.

Jasper Sieniewicz has read some Thoreau, but not as extensively as his father. "I'm sure it's instilled in me in ways that I probably am not even really aware of," he said. His father has furnished the cabin authentically, with hard wooden chairs and a desk; if it were up to Jasper, there'd be a couch instead, but he recognizes that his father will be enjoying more time there than he and his brother, who are busy building their careers as engineers.

Satchel did spend the night there a few years back with his then girlfriend. "I honestly would be too scared to stay there alone," he said.

"Those woods are spooky."

[Dorie Chevlen](#) covers real estate and the housing industry for The Times, and writes about home design and décor for Wirecutter.