The Zahniser family cabin is shown on Wednesday, September 10, 2014, during a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the National Wilderness Act in Johnsburg. The Zahniser family gave a conservation easement on their cabin to protect it from development as well as 5 acres of land to the State of New York. (Megan Farmer - mfarmer@poststar.com)

JOHNSBURG -- In the 1960s, Howard Zahniser may have looked out at Crane Mountain from the porch of his Johnsburg cabin, admiring its beauty and thinking about how the land should be protected.

The cabin where Zahniser wrote early drafts of the National Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964 was itself protected Wednesday, with the announcement that the family has agreed to donate a conservation easement to the state, preventing the cabin from being redeveloped.
The family, which will still be able to use the cabin three weeks a year, also has donated the surrounding five acres, bordering the Siamese Pond Wilderness, as a tribute to Zahniser’s legacy.

“The Zahniser family is honored to make this gift to the Department of Environmental Conservation and to the people of New York and to others from other places who will enjoy seeing this very verdant spot,” said Howard’s son, Mathias Zahniser, at an announcement at the cabin.

The event was tied to the 50th anniversary of the law, which was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson on Sept. 3, 1964. About 109 million acres across the country is protected as wilderness because of the legislation.

Howard Zahniser, who served as executive director of the Wilderness Society in Washington, D.C., first visited the Adirondacks and fell in love with the region in 1946. His father bought the cabin and 31 surrounding acres in 1947 and the family spent time there in the summers, beginning in 1948.

Four generations of family members have used the cabin over eight decades. The simple two-story wooden cabin has a stone fireplace and a porch. An inscription carved into the wooden fireplace mantle reads in part: “Yours are the woods, waters, and wildlife of an Adirondack cabinland up at the end of the trail where the wilderness begins.”

It was on this property that Howard Zahniser befriended neighbor and conservationist Paul Schaefer, who became a founder of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserves. Bob Marshall was also instrumental in the effort to get a national wilderness bill written and passed. Relatives of all three families were on hand for the announcement.

New York is in the forefront of land protection efforts, enshrining it in its state constitution in 1894 as article XIV, Mathias Zahniser said.

“It began with the preservation of the Adirondacks and Catskills as land left forever wild by the people of New York,” he said.

Howard Zahniser wanted federal legislation and began working on drafts of the legislation in the mid-1950s. He died in 1964 a few months before the bill was enacted.

Sen. Elizabeth Little, R-Queensbury, said it is important that the state recognize the historical nature of the cabin.

“Let other people know that this is where the National Wilderness act began, among two neighbors,” she said.

Assemblyman Dan Stec, R-Queensbury, mentioned he is a proud 46er, having
climbed the 46 Adirondack High Peaks. Hikers spend a lot of time looking at maps and reading, he said, and he has come across iconic names such as Zahniser in the wilderness community.

Stec said while people can debate about how much land to protect, it is important to recognize the passion and efforts of people like Zahniser. “It’s a national treasure,” he said of the cabin.

Zahniser was also praised by Lani Ulrich, chairwoman of the Adirondack Park Agency.

“Mr. Zahniser strongly believed that modern civilization needed protected wilderness areas, places where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man,” she said. “He worked tirelessly to enlighten citizens and educate policymakers on why it is imperative to protect the world’s wildest places.

“What a privilege it would be just to spend the quiet hours on the property here,” Ulrich added.

It is important to preserve the land, according to David Gibson, a partner with Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve.

“It’s essential to who we are as human beings. We started out as part of wild nature,” he said.

“This is where wilderness preservation began — right on this spot. The Adirondacks can be proud of it,” Gibson added.