

ISSUE BRIEF

PRESERVATION PRIORITY

# Diversity, Inclusion, and Racial Justice

PRESERVATION PRIORITIES TASK FORCE



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This publication is one of four Issue Briefs created by the Preservation Priorities Task Force, a partnership of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Preservation Partners Network. Formed in 2020, this two-year project brings together preservation advocates from across the country to help statewide and local organizations address four significant, interrelated issues facing the preservation movement:

- Affordable housing and density
- Diversity, inclusion, and racial justice
- Preservation trades and workforce development
- Sustainability and climate action

These challenges are not new. Preservation organizations have grappled with them for years and many are making great strides. Yet the magnitude and complexity of these issues can prove daunting for organizations working on their own. Effective messaging, innovative policies, compelling case studies, and best practices can be hard to find. There is an urgent need for coordinated and collaborative action across the preservation movement.

Not intended as comprehensive studies, the four Issue Briefs are designed to build mutual understanding of these topics, spark conversation, and inspire action at the local and state levels. Preservation organizations and advocates are encouraged to use the Issue Briefs in any number of ways—as guides for discussions with community leaders and stakeholders, background for outreach to potential partners, support materials for fundraising efforts, and more.

The Issue Briefs also provide a foundation for the next phase of this initiative: developing practical tools for use by preservation organizations, advocates, and practitioners across the country. For more information and to learn how you can participate in this effort, visit [preservationpriorities.org](https://preservationpriorities.org).

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## INTRODUCTION: FOCUSING ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

Historic preservation as a movement and a discipline suffers from a lack of diversity and inclusion. While there has been progress recently, historic places associated with people of color and women are still significantly underrepresented in the National Register of Historic Places and at the state and local levels. Preservation programs and processes are complex and difficult for many diverse communities to access. The professional composition of the field remains overwhelmingly white.

These factors hinder important opportunities to correct the public record and build a shared foundation of preserved historic places that validate and reinforce the contributions and stories of marginalized populations. This lack of diversity weakens the field's ability to fulfill its mission of protecting the places that matter to all Americans.

Many aspects of diversity, inclusion, and accessibility need to be addressed within the preservation field, including sexual orientation and gender equality. Recognizing that the historic preservation movement has deliberately and systemically marginalized communities based on race more than any other factor, this Issue Brief focuses on challenges and opportunities related to race and ethnicity. Racial equity issues in preservation and planning are long-standing and have been studied and written about extensively. While some individual communities and organizations are making progress toward more equitable preservation practice, greater urgency



***Historic places associated with people of color, women, and the LGBTQ community are significantly underrepresented on national, state, and local registers of historic places. Shown above is the view overlooking the site where the first enslaved Africans arrived in 1619, now the Fort Monroe National Monument, Virginia. Photo: Patti Ferguson.***

and focus on action are still needed. Addressing racial equity is a critical step in making the preservation movement relevant to a broader cross-section of Americans. Overcoming barriers to racial equity can open doors to progress and set precedents for change in other important areas of diversity as well.

The Diversity, Inclusion, and Racial Justice Working Group has identified two priority areas where focused attention could bring greater racial equity to the field: diversifying the professional composition of the field and recognizing and protecting more diverse types of places and heritage. While the preservation movement has taken steps to acknowledge and address these dual deficits, change has been slow and arduous. Indeed, the diversity deficit in the preservation field stems largely from broader racial injustices that have limited the ability to research, appreciate, and preserve historic places associated with people of color.<sup>1</sup>

## Diversity, inclusion, and racial justice in practice

The field of historic preservation is not immune to the white supremacy and systemic racism that permeate American society. As the National Trust for Historic Preservation stated in June 2020, “Historic preservation organizations have an obligation to confront and address structural racism within our own institutions.”<sup>2</sup>

The population of preservation advocates, boards of directors, and professionals remains predominantly white. This condition is not unique to preservation, as people of color are underrepresented in the field of architecture and other adjacent professions as well. Fewer than one in five licensed architects identifies as a person of color. Only two percent of licensed architects are African American, despite making up 13 percent of the U.S. population. Given the historically close association between architecture and preservation, these statistics are suggestive of conditions in the preservation field as well.

Similarly, the places afforded protection under current preservation policies still fall short of representing the full, multilayered, and intersectional history of the nation’s diverse population. Less than 10 percent of National Register listings explicitly acknowledge the history or contributions of women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community. Preservation practices developed by white people<sup>3</sup> have systematically excluded the histories of communities of color, whose stories have taken place in buildings, spaces, and landscapes that are not always recognized as eligible for historic designation and protection.



**Concerns that preservation can lead to displacement.** Murals recognizing Mexican American history are found throughout Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood. A local landmark nomination that proposed designation of 75 murals as well as hundreds of other properties lost support from community members over concerns that landmarking could lead to gentrification and displacement. Photo: Vince Michael

Signs of progress can be found, however. For example, at the national level, the National Park Service recently established the Underrepresented Community (URC) Grant program and has designated as park units an increasing number of sites associated with civil rights history. The National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund has attracted significant financial support from donors and has provided grants to more than 150 local preservation projects across the country to date. Many states have completed surveys of sites associated with

African American and Latinx heritage. Similar work is occurring at the local level through projects such as Survey-LA, Los Angeles's citywide historic resources survey.

In Austin, Texas, the city's Translating Community History Project provides a recent example of how preservationists are collaborating with local stakeholders to identify, interpret, and protect important sites in diverse neighborhoods. Supported by a URC grant from the Park Service, the project included training in inclusive outreach methods, use of materials in both English and Spanish, door-knocking by students from a nearby Historically Black College/University (HBCU), and community meetings structured to feature local stories rather than staff or consultant presentations.

The project was built on a collaboration with stakeholder groups composed largely of long-term community members who have safeguarded their local heritage for decades but have not intersected with the traditional preservation field. To date, the project has resulted in National Register nominations for Huston-Tillotson University (Austin's only HBCU) and Parque Zaragoza, a community hub for Mexican American life. In addition, community heritage projects have knit together archival research, oral histories, and resident profiles for public access and consumption.

This example illustrates that diversifying who is involved in preservation activities is essential to the field's ability to reach underrepresented communities. Additional efforts are needed across the country to overcome systemic barriers and close the diversity gap in preservation.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The challenges posed by the diversity deficit in historic preservation are deeply entrenched and require deliberate and concerted effort to overcome. Preservationists must acknowledge that communities of color continue to struggle with centuries of oppression and inequity and that historic preservation, knowingly and unknowingly, has contributed to this oppression and inequity. Systemic change requires significant work, engagement, and navigating through discomfort. Identifying the challenges to diversity in preservation can reveal opportunities for acknowledgment and point toward strategies for change and greater inclusion within the field. Below is a summary of significant challenges, as well as opportunities to move forward to create a more inclusive and equitable historic preservation movement.

### **Too much focus on architectural significance and physical integrity**

The identification of historic resources is often based primarily on architectural criteria. This emphasis on physical form and detail can overshadow the historical or cultural significance of buildings, places, and landscapes. Furthermore, even when historical or cultural significance are taken into consideration, the contributions of people of color and other underrepresented groups in public history are too often ignored.

Established in the 19th- and early 20th-century by white Americans, the early historic preservation movement in the U.S. focused on European notions of architecture, physical integrity, and the legacies of elite, white, and

predominantly male figures. Preservation activity was frequently rooted in exclusive narratives of American history related to race and power that excluded the richness of multiple viewpoints. The preservation systems, practices, and incentives that still guide preservation practice today were often based on these earlier exclusionary traditions and have not been significantly updated since the 1970s.

For example, the four criteria used to evaluate significance for listing on the National Register, and the seven considerations used to assist in evaluating the integrity of a given resource, need review, updating, and better guidance. Reviewers in some states and regions tend to prioritize architectural significance and material integrity above the other criteria, although there is no requirement to do so.

## While an emphasis on material integrity is appropriate for properties significant only for their design, integrity should be considered more broadly for properties with cultural or historical significance.

While an emphasis on material integrity is appropriate for properties significant only for their design, integrity should be considered more broadly for properties with cultural or historical significance. For these properties, location, setting, feeling, and association, as well as a more holistic perspective on design, should be

considered the key factors for assessing integrity. Because so many state and local designation and design review policies and practices are based on standards set by the National Park Service, changes at the national level could be particularly influential.

“Period of significance” is another influential concept used in National Register listing that should be evaluated from an equity perspective. Too often, the period of significance for a historic property is narrowly defined to focus attention on the architect and/or original owner of a building. This limits the possibility to fully consider how buildings, places, and landscapes evolve over time and often include later histories related to changing demographics and diverse populations. Finally, the complexity and evolving requirements for preparing a National Register nomination make it nearly impossible to list a property or site without retaining professional consultants. This creates a financial barrier that keeps designation, and the benefits of listing, out of reach for those who may need them most.

### **Opportunities:**

- Expand existing grant programs and develop new funding sources to identify and preserve the heritage of women, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian/Pacific Islander people.
- Expand survey techniques to include crowdsourcing and other strategies to ensure that local communities are fully involved in determining what is important in their communities.
- Eliminate barriers to the designation of culturally diverse historic resources by

reimagining criteria for landmark designation at the local level.

- Develop context statements and theme studies focused on underrepresented histories and communities.
- Provide outcomes-based guidance to state preservation offices to ensure more consistency in how non-architectural criteria are evaluated and applied. This could include increasing the importance of history in identifying historic resources, refining the concept of period of significance, and incorporating intangible heritage.
- Develop new treatment standards that are less focused on architectural integrity for properties that are designated primarily for their historic and cultural significance.

## Barriers to accessing preservation programs and tools

The ambition of preservation is to achieve broader societal well-being, but its narrow focus on building-centered outcomes has eroded trust and limited broader community support. Current preservation tools may not be responsive to the priorities of communities of color and other groups who are underrepresented in preservation practice. Historic designation is often viewed as contributing to increased costs for rehabilitation and maintenance, which can make it harder for those with income constraints to stay in their properties. This has contributed to the perception that preservation is focused more on preserving buildings than helping people. This can also lead to perceptions that preservation contributes to neighborhood displacement.

Historically, and in some cases still today, these problems are not just perception, but reality.

The standards and guidelines for rehabilitation are not understood by many property owners and rehabilitation contractors. Few are aware that information and resources exist and do not know where to seek assistance. Preservation incentives are geared toward substantial rehabilitation rather than maintenance, meaning that to qualify for most tax incentives, the cost of rehabilitation must exceed the pre-rehabilitation cost of the building itself. This furthers the perception that preservation is meant for wealthy newcomers rather than existing property owners.

### *Opportunities:*

- Work in concert with community members to develop strategies to designate and protect historic places in a manner that responds to broader issues of community concern.
- Engage communities of color to address how to preserve or remove monuments or sites associated with complex history and individuals.
- Develop a tool kit to help local preservation advocates collaborate directly with communities on ways to recognize and protect important sites.
- Collect examples of how communities of color are using innovative tools to protect historic resources.



**Need for diversity among staff and leadership of preservation organizations.** Efforts such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Diversity Scholarship Program seek to address a continued lack of diversity on the staff, leadership, and membership of preservation organizations. Pictured are the 2015 scholars at the PastForward National Preservation Conference in Washington, D.C. Photo: David Keith.

## Lack of diversity among preservation staff and boards

Although comprehensive data is not available, a quick glance at staff rosters or participants at preservation conferences shows that the personnel and leadership of non-profit organizations and city agencies often do not reflect the demographics of many of the communities they serve. People of color are frequently not in decision-making positions within preservation organizations. Organizations are not often equipped with the staff, tools, and cross-cultural competencies needed to

authentically engage with communities of color equitably.

Part of the problem is that preservation is not an accessible career track generally. Preservation is rarely included in educational curricula, from K-12 through the college level. Many preservationists discover the field “accidentally.” The lack of exposure and guidance for students regarding careers in preservation reduces the number and diversity of candidates seeking to enter the field. While some organizations are making deliberate efforts to attract and retain staff members of color, much more diversity is needed.



## Opportunities:

- Reduce barriers to entry into historic preservation activities and careers by providing more scholarship opportunities and earlier exposure to preservation career opportunities.
- Develop historic preservation programs in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).
- Work with existing historic preservation programs and the National Council for Preservation Education to help attract women, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian/Pacific Islander students.
- Ensure that equity, inclusion, and social justice are included in preservation curriculums, as well as techniques for authentic community engagement.
- Eliminate barriers for employment by calibrating academic and experience requirements to the needs of the position and providing appropriate compensation.
- Recruit people of color to serve on boards of directors of local and state preservation organizations.
- Promote staff from diverse backgrounds into leadership roles.
- Provide opportunities for K-12 students to learn about historic preservation through enrichment programs that align with state curriculum standards and relate to the stories of the communities in which they live.



**Preserving places that tell under-recognized stories.** In March 2021, marchers carried signs honoring the role of local civil rights leaders who helped to peacefully desegregate the Woolworth's lunch counter in downtown San Antonio. Recognition of this important story helped sway support to save the building and include interpretation of this chapter in the city's history as part of a new museum. Photo: Vince Michael.

## A need for research and evaluation

More research is needed to understand and identify the extent of the diversity deficit in traditional preservation work. This includes recognizing how gaps in cultural representation may influence decisions about budgets, staffing, programmatic priorities, partnerships, and financial investments. Organizational self-assessments could provide information on issues such as staff and board diversity.

Critical analysis of the full range of preservation practices is also needed, including a review of

survey and evaluation methodologies as well as re-evaluation of currently designated resources to uncover significance beyond architecture. State and local preservation advocates could work with government and academic partners to address other racial equity issues as well. How could historic preservation success be evaluated using more inclusive and equitable metrics? For example, local preservation programs could measure community participation and agency in the designation process, rather than only tracking properties listed and design reviews completed.

What are the impacts of traditional preservation approaches in historic neighborhoods where communities of color have persevered despite historic and ongoing marginalization? How have people of color successfully protected their communities and heritage outside of parameters of traditional preservation practice? How could those methods be supported and recognized by the preservation field? For example, what can we learn from Native American tribes about how they celebrate and respect the intersection of the tangible and intangible in their concept of place and preservation?

## CONCLUSION: A MOVEMENT THAT IS READY TO EMBRACE CHANGE

While more understanding of these complex and difficult issues is clearly needed, the learning process should not delay action. Most practitioners recognize that the lack of diversity and inclusion in our field is holding the movement back. This is not a new topic. It is time to move toward actionable, outcomes-based strategies, and the field is ready to embrace the urgency of the need for change. Indeed, many

state and local organizations and preservation commissions are working creatively and successfully to address these issues. In coming months, the Diversity, Inclusion, and Racial Justice Working Group will be sharing examples of success and partnering with preservationists and other allied groups to identify paths toward a more inclusive and just preservation movement.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America](#), by Richard Rothstein (2017). This book details how the racial segregation and concentrated poverty that we see in our communities today is the result of intentional government policies, including exclusionary zoning, backed by decisions of the Supreme Court.

[Building a Foundation for Action: Anti-Racist Historic Preservation Resources](#), compiled by Erica Avrami and Anna Gasha through the Urban Heritage, Sustainability, and Social Inclusion Initiative, a collaboration of the Columbia GSAPP Historic Preservation Program, the Earth Institute – Center for Sustainable Urban Development, and The American Assembly, with support from the New York Community Trust. This regularly updated compilation is an “open-access, collaborative resource list for preservationists seeking to acknowledge the field’s structural racism and to take actions toward decentering Whiteness.”

[Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation](#), by Ned Kaufman (2009). This book offers a series of essays designed to challenge long-standing preservation practices and inspire more inclusive strategies

that embrace the diversity of our cultural heritage.

[Preservation and Social Inclusion](#), edited by Erica Avrami (2020). Part of the Issues in Preservation Policy series from Columbia University Press, this book “documents historic preservation’s progress toward inclusivity and explores further steps to be taken” in a series of chapters written by a range of researchers and preservation practitioners.

[Preserving African American Places: Growing Preservation’s Potential as a Path for Equity](#), prepared by National Trust for Historic Preservation (2020). This report seeks to understand the implications of place-based injustice and its impact on the preservation of African American cultural heritage, as well as to identify preservation-based strategies for equitable growth and development that respect the historical and present-day realities and conditions of African American neighborhoods. Case studies and examples of innovative local and statewide approaches are included.

[Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ+ History in San Francisco](#), prepared for the City of San Francisco by Donna J. Graves and Shayne E. Watson (2015). This document provides an example of how communities are developing new frameworks to survey, recognize, designate, and protect sites representing diverse cultures and histories.

## NOTES

- 1 For this discussion, we would like to acknowledge that diversity comes in many forms. While the Diversity, Inclusion, and Racial Justice Working Group has chosen to focus primarily on issues of racial diversity for the scope of this exercise, we recognize that, “A broad definition includes not only race, ethnicity, and gender — the groups that most often come to mind when the term “diversity” is used—but also age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education...” (Source: [www.racialequitytools.org](http://www.racialequitytools.org)). These are important themes and issues that the entire movement must incorporate into practice and endeavor to address.
- 2 National Trust for Historic Preservation, “We Believe Black Lives Matter,” June 12, 2020, <https://savingplaces.org/press-center/media-resources/we-believe-black-lives-matter>
- 3 K. Kennedy Whithers, architect and founder of UnRedact the Facts, advocates for the active voice in describing structural racism, which fosters accountability by attributing acts to their actors (in this case, white people). <https://www.unredactthefacts.com/>

## COVER PHOTO

**Students in the National Trust’s HOPE Crew trades training program helped restore the home where singer and activist Nina Simone grew up in Tryon, North Carolina.** Once near collapse, the home was restored with support from the Trust’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund and is now permanently protected through an easement held by Preservation North Carolina. Photo: Nancy Pierce/National Trust for Historic Preservation.

## About the Preservation Priorities Task Force

Established through a formal agreement between the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Preservation Partners Network, the task force includes four working groups, one for each issue, plus a steering committee and a communications subcommittee. To date, more than 50 preservation practitioners have joined working groups, representing 23 states and dozens of organizations. A full list of task force members is available at [preservationpriorities.org](https://preservationpriorities.org).

### *What's coming next?*

The working groups will spend the next year developing and sharing new resources to support efforts by preservation advocates related to each of the four issues. These resources may include key messages and talking points, policy examples, case studies, one-pagers, tip sheets, and webinars. This growing set of tools will be available at [preservationpriorities.org](https://preservationpriorities.org).

### *Join us!*

The more voices we have involved in this project, the better it will be. Please consider lending your valuable expertise and perspective. For instance, you can:

- Join a working group to help with the next phase
- Share a case study related to one of the priority issues
- Use an Issue Brief in your work and let us know how it goes
- Spread the word about this project within your networks

To get involved, please visit [preservationpriorities.org](https://preservationpriorities.org) or contact:

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We look forward to working with you!

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