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The Full Spectrum of History: Prioritizing Diversity and Inclusion in Preservation



National Trust for Historic Preservation

**Preservation
Leadership Forum**

Introduction: Our Future Is in Diversity

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Two and a half years ago, a remarkable essay by the late scholar and preservationist Clement Price about his grandmother's house in Columbia, South Carolina, [appeared in these pages](#). The house itself was a “simple bungalow, probably built in the 1920s,” and was unlikely to “make any credible list of historically significant places.” And yet, for both Price's family and our understanding of history, “Big Mama's House” held hidden riches. Even beyond its deep personal resonance for Price, the house conveyed a wealth of knowledge about the African American experience during the days of Jim Crow and burgeoning civil rights struggles.

“Places and spaces like Big Mama's House” are important, Price emphasized, because they “connect very ordinary Americans with their personal histories, and in turn, these histories connect with the larger narrative of the making of a more perfect and yet complicated union.” This, he argued, represented a significant new frontier in our work, and he was heartened to see that “the old consensus view of preservation that eschewed the humble places where so many Americans learned of the power of place and memory” was falling away. Instead, “organizations, agencies, and institutions involved in historic preservation are increasingly marked by a broadening respect for all sorts of historical narratives, memories, places, and sites.”

Sadly, Price, one of the most eloquent voices for expanding the scope of traditional preservation, passed on later that year. We still miss his wisdom and guidance. But the vision he articulated continues. Today as never before, preservationists are striving to ensure that the American landscape tells the full story of our collective past; that our movement is an inclusive one; and that we are listening to, and learning from, the diverse communities connected to the places we work to save.

These are extraordinarily important efforts, both for the next 50 years of preservation and for the future of our country. For too long, historic preservation followed the same methodological approach and held the same conscious and unconscious biases as early American historians, which often led to egregious oversights. Whether in textbooks or house museums, we specialized in top-down history that focused on the great deeds of white men. Meanwhile, the contributions of millions of women, people of color, and other underrepresented communities were often overlooked.

These silences had repercussions for our historic landscape. The mansions of Founding Fathers, wealthy plantation owners, and famous industrialists were maintained, while the cabins that housed enslaved persons and the tenements of ordinary workers were left to ruin with minimal acknowledgment of their historical significance. We preserved many of our Western forts, but only recently have we included in their interpretations the stories of the societies and cultures, often Native American or Hispanic, that were displaced in their wake. Our great men have been venerated, the vast majority of them rightfully so, but too often the stories of pioneering women were at best consigned to footnotes.

Telling the American story in this top-down and one-sided fashion also distorted our understanding of our history. For example, we were taught for generations that slavery in the United States ended mainly because Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, followed by the ratification of the 13th Amendment in December 1865. These events are both critical political acts, to be sure. But we now also know—by looking at history through a wider and more authentic lens—that Lincoln’s hand had been forced in large part by enslaved persons in the South, who voted with their feet to end the “peculiar institution” by joining Union troops. Thousands of these self-emancipated slaves ended up at [Fort Monroe in Hampton, Virginia](#), which is now one of the Trust’s National Treasures—our signature portfolio of significant and threatened places—and does an exemplary job of highlighting this important story.

Perhaps most distressing, the limited narratives of old have, in some communities, bred an unfortunate distrust of our work and intentions. Many people of color who noticed that their stories had not been told, and that the places they cared about had not received the necessary attention, worked to restore neighborhoods and beloved places with little support from the preservation community. Only in the late 1980s and early '90s—thanks to the hard work of state preservation leaders such as Fred Williamson of Rhode Island and Elizabeth Lyon of Georgia and efforts like the comprehensive [Five Views](#) survey of ethnic historic sites in California—did the consensus shift. Saving diverse places began to take on the importance it had always warranted.

And none too soon, since reflecting on the full American story—including all its unheralded and underappreciated chapters—is critical to understanding today's fights for justice and equality. However hard to confront at times, the complex and difficult chapters of our history resonate in and inform contemporary struggles, from immigration reform to LGBTQ rights advocacy to Black Lives Matter.

Nor, without a more thorough reckoning with and appreciation of our past, will we understand the America of the future. By 2044, less than 30 years from now, the United States will be a majority nonwhite nation—and women are already a majority of the population! All the more reason why we have to tell the stories of all our citizens and work unceasingly to build a preservation movement that looks more like America.

2015 DIVERSITY SUMMIT

At PastForward, our 2015 National Preservation Conference in Washington, D.C., we convened a “Diversity Summit” to take stock of where we are on these vital efforts and to help foster new partnerships and opportunities for advancing diversity and inclusion. There, preservationists, social justice advocates, and representatives from an array of ethnic and minority groups came together for an extended conversation on saving diverse places, on coming to terms with difficult histories—and on how both affect the civil rights struggles of the 21st century.

What ensued was a substantive and powerful discussion. Former National Park Service Director Bob Stanton began the day by acknowledging the tension between the vision of “We the People” embedded in the U.S. Constitution and the institutional legacies of segregation and Jim Crow, stressing that we must overcome the latter to do justice to the former. Jose Antonio Tijerino, president of the Hispanic Heritage Foundation, built on this by discussing segregation in the West and its impact on Latinos and Asian Americans in California. And Claudia Withers, chief operating officer of the NAACP, reminded us that the movement to end segregation in America didn’t just unfold in courtrooms and hallowed places like the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. It originated in modest homes—like those of [Pauli Murray](#) and Amelia Boynton Robinson—and in ordinary workplaces all over the nation.

Ellie Smeal, co-founder and president of Feminist Majority, told us about her experience at Seneca Falls, the birthplace of the women’s rights movement in America. Asian Pacific American Institute President Floyd Mori moved the crowd with his remembrances of his first trip to the “camp” he had heard his relatives talk about—Topaz, the Japanese internment facility in the Utah desert. Sarah Warbelow, legal director of the Human Rights Campaign, related the underappreciated story of Compton’s Cafeteria, where, even before Stonewall, transgender women in California publicly protested against discrimination. That site is now lost; only a plaque remains.

Over the course of the discussion, common themes emerged. All of the panelists agreed that recognizing and honoring diverse stories was key to understanding our present political debates and to building a more inclusive and allied future. All felt that, while we have made important strides as a movement, we still have a lot of work to do to get this right. All believed that forging stronger partnerships with and across diverse groups was essential for continued success. And all emphasized the wisdom of today’s broader vision of preservation, in which we seek to save the modest and even ordinary places where history happened.

After the panel discussion, the audience broke into smaller groups to continue the conversation and to further refine the tools and perspectives that will bring our preservation movement closer toward these critical goals. The articles in this issue both encapsulate and grow out of these wide-ranging and powerful discussions. We hope you will find them insightful and inspiring as you continue your own work to save the places that matter.

To keep moving forward, let's keep broadening our perspective and thinking about the places that tell our full national story. Not every American of importance grew up or lived in a mansion. And sometimes the places that matter most to a community are not beautiful buildings, but a [handball court in Maravilla, California](#); a [playground in San Gabriel, California](#); or a haunting, empty stretch of green along a highway in [Richmond, Virginia's Shockoe Bottom](#), where the antebellum slave trade once thrived.

Speaking about the Pullman neighborhood of Chicago last year, President Barack Obama put this so well. "Part of what we're preserving here," he said, is "understanding that places that look ordinary are nothing but extraordinary. The places you live are extraordinary, which means you can be extraordinary." History happens all around us, in all our neighborhoods and communities and in everyday deeds of kindness, compassion, justice, and love. These stories should be honored and preserved too.

And we are doing it. All over America, preservationists are finding more ways to recognize and affirm the diverse stories around us. We are digging deeper, moving beyond buildings to preserve more intangible—but no less important—historic assets. And the truly exciting thing is that we still have room to grow. As our dear departed friend Clem Price put it two years ago, diversity and inclusiveness "give the historic preservation movement an opportunity to become the 'next big thing' that will contribute to democracy's sense of its past and the essential dignity of the places, like Big Mama's House, that contributed to it."

Clem is right. At the end of the day, a more diverse and inclusive preservation movement is not just an enormous opportunity for us to flourish. It is our responsibility to the past, present, and

future of our nation. As the chair of the National Trust's Board of Trustees Marita Rivero concluded at the close of the Washington summit: "Diversity is about humanity. We are all fighting for human rights. We are all always here, so let's make sure everyone's stories are told." FJ

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TAKEAWAY

Read Clement Alexander Price's "When Historic Sites Reveal the New American Past: Reflections on History, Memory and the Unknown."



TAKEAWAY

Read Toni Lee's "Cultural Diversity in Historic Preservation: Where We Have Been, Where We Are Going (Update)."