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Relevance and Resilience: Proceedings from PastForward Online 2020



PAST **ONLINE**
FORWARD **OCTOBER 27-30TH**

A CONFERENCE OF THE NATIONAL
TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation
Leadership Forum**

Introduction: Tackling Today's Critical Issues

PAUL EDMONDSON

I want to thank you for attending [PastForward Online 2020](#), our first all-virtual national preservation conference! Although we can't meet in person, we are thrilled that this conference is accessible to so many people—4,200 conference registrants—and especially to so many who are new to the preservation movement.

Back in February of this year, our PastForward National Steering Committee developed our conference theme—*Relevance and Resilience*—and they were incredibly prescient since it speaks directly to the challenges facing our nation and the preservation movement today. By ensuring that preservation is relevant to more people, in more places, we can help communities be more resilient in the years to come.

Thanks to a digital platform, we are pleased to welcome our largest cohort of [Diversity Scholars](#) to date. Reflecting the richness of our shared heritage and the breadth of the preservation movement, these 200 Scholars truly enrich the PastForward experience for all attendees, and we are grateful for their participation.

As you all well know, this year has been challenging in so many ways.

From a global pandemic, to a long-overdue reckoning on race and justice, to the continuing threat of global climate change, there has never been a more important moment for us to come together to discuss and advance the solutions that preservation—in all its many forms—offers for these and other challenges we face.

This conference gives us the opportunity to hear from our colleagues across the field and in related fields about creative ways that they are dealing with the issues of the day. But it's also an opportunity to step back from our day-to-day work, to focus on the big picture, and, perhaps, to think about how we might develop an action agenda for the preservation movement to meet the challenges of our time. I'll come back to that thought in a minute.

But first, a major theme of this conference is about how preservation can be used as a tool for [justice and equity](#). For many preservationists, our work in this area actually goes back decades, but the current environment demands that we re-examine and recommit to ensure that this work—and the people who do that work—reflects the [full history](#) of this country, and advances preservation as a way to strengthen all American communities.

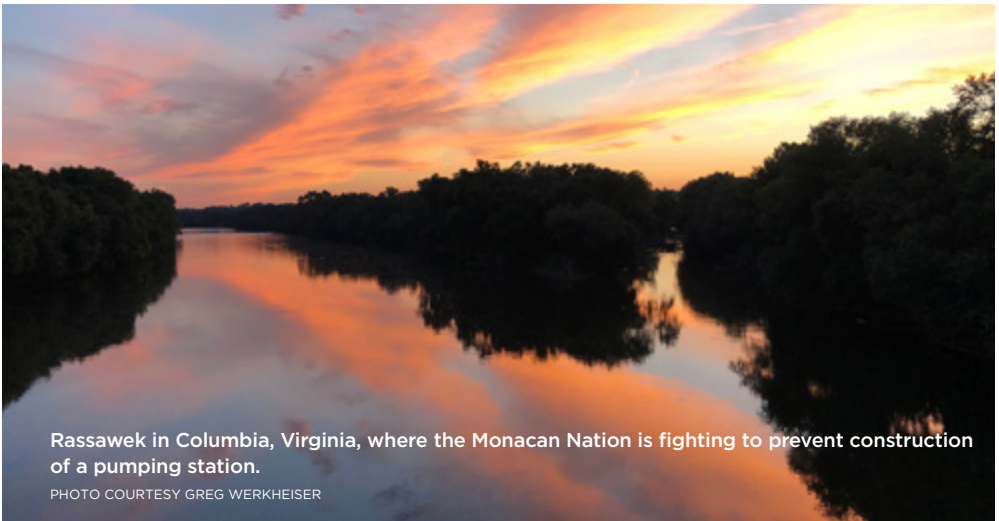
The times also demand that we re-examine our positions and practices with this same goal in mind. One good example is the Trust’s decision earlier this year [to call for removal of Confederate monuments](#) that continue to serve as symbols of white supremacy, or to repurpose them within landscapes of justice.

We are also committed to using our programmatic resources to contribute to an inclusive national narrative by protecting and elevating historic places that tell the full history of the United States and by inspiring broad public support of this work.

This year’s list of [11 Most Endangered Historic Places](#) reflects this priority. It includes [Rassawek](#) in Columbia, Virginia, where the Monacan Nation is fighting to prevent construction of a pumping station atop an incredibly important archaeological site where their



National Trust statement on Confederate reiterates commitment to justice.



Rassawek in Columbia, Virginia, where the Monacan Nation is fighting to prevent construction of a pumping station.

PHOTO COURTESY GREG WERKHEISER

original capital was located. It includes the [Harada House](#) in Riverside, California, where Harold Harada scrawled a message of defiance on the wall as he and his family were being taken to an internment camp, even while fighting to retain ownership of their home. And it includes Roberts Temple in Chicago, where Mamie Till Mobley insisted on an open casket funeral so that the world could see how her 14-year-old son had been brutally murdered. These are places worth fighting for because they go to the very heart of what makes us Americans.

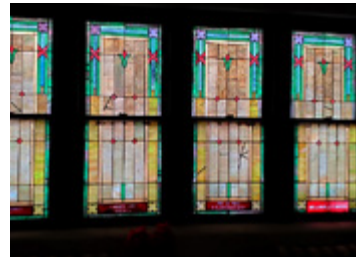
We are also directly investing in saving these important places. Back in July, we announced more than \$1.6 million in grants to 27 sites and organizations with funding provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through the [African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund](#).

Over the past three years, we have invested more than \$4.3 million to help preserve 65 historic African American buildings and landscapes.

With support from the American Express Foundation and Benjamin Moore, we also have invested more than \$2 million to help preserve places [where women made history](#), and we've used crowdsourcing to highlight more than 1,000 historic places that tell women's stories. This represents only the beginning of this initiative.

We are also committed to using our own historic sites to tell the full and often hidden stories of American history. For example, the [Glass House, in Connecticut, a National Trust Historic Site](#), recently launched initiatives to highlight its connection to LGBTQ+ history, including a year-long exhibition that coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising.

Using preservation to advance the cause of justice and equity is only one of many subjects that we will explore during this conference, but it may be the most important and most relevant work that we do as a movement today. I am extremely proud to be part of an organization and a movement that has made this a priority for our time.



The historic Vernon AME church in Tulsa, Oklahoma received funds through the African American Cultural Heritage Fund.

PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT TURNER



Programming at the Glass House highlights its connection to LGBTQ+ history.

PHOTO COURTESY ROBIN HILL

Speaking of priorities, I would like to end my brief remarks here today with a request. I ask that you give serious thought about how together we can tackle the most critical issues facing the preservation field. There will be many thoughtful conversations happening at this conference—and outside of this conference—about equity and preservation; about climate change; about density and affordable housing; about engaging new audiences; and about many other issues relating to our work. I recommend we build upon these efforts, share our different perspectives, and identify

specific ways we can advance our goal of making preservation a more just, resilient, and relevant practice.

Over the next several months, it is our intention to join with partner organizations and allies to convene additional listening sessions to help the preservation community define a [*National Impact Agenda*](#), which we hope to share during Preservation Month 2021. I hope that you will help us in this process by generously sharing your ideas, your experiences, and your perspectives. **FJ**

PAUL EDMONDSON is president and CEO of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.