PastForward Online 2021
Conference Proceedings: Lead the Change
I’m Paul Edmondson, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and I want to welcome you to PastForward 2021, our second all-virtual national preservation conference and annual meeting!

Please join me in welcoming the 200 Diversity Scholars attending this year’s conference. From around the country and across the movement, these scholars reflect the richness of our shared heritage, and I am truly grateful for their participation, as well as that of their conference mentors.

Before going any further, even though this is a virtual conference, I would like to acknowledge that the National Trust occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of many Indigenous peoples and tribes, including lands ceded in treaties. Our headquarters office in Washington, D.C., where I am today, sits on the ancestral lands and overlooks the waterways of the Anacostan or Nacotchtank peoples, and the neighboring Piscataway and Pamunkey peoples. I affirm our organization’s respect for Indigenous sovereignty, history, cultural traditions, and experiences.

This past February, the 18-member PastForward National Steering Committee provided clear and powerful guidance that this year’s conference should be organized around the idea that each of us has a leadership role to play in bringing about change in what we preserve and how we preserve, for the benefit of our communities, our country, and our world. Although the times we live in are filled with challenges, across the preservation world we all have made changes in response to the global pandemic: finding new ways to safely engage the public at historic sites, using digital tools to convene publicly, and responding to the need to help sustain local legacy businesses. Many of these changes, as noted in research conducted by the National Main Street Center, will last beyond the pandemic.
While we’ve weathered an unprecedented number of natural disasters caused by climate change, the preservation movement is being newly inspired to use the inherent resilience of historic places, to adapt our historic buildings and landscapes, and to demonstrate that building reuse is a powerful form of climate action.

Inspired by a long overdue reckoning on race and justice, the movement is also finding ways to make our programs more accessible, our policies more equitable, our practices more inclusive, and our interpretations more truthful. For example, a $20 million gift to the National Trust for the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund by MacKenzie Scott and Dan Jewett will be used to help further protect the places and share the stories of African American activism, achievement, and resilience.

As change-makers, this community knows that we can go farther, achieve more, and become more relevant by working together. That’s why the National Trust began at PastForward 2020 and continued throughout the past year convening conversations and collecting ideas with partners and allies to craft a National Impact Agenda for the preservation movement, which we are calling “Leading the Change Together.” In listening to people across the preservation movement, we learned that the field is guided by a diverse yet interconnected set of principles. Some people are motivated by all of these, some by a smaller set—but all preservationists believe deeply in the power of preservation to
create a better future. I hope you see the ideas that guide and inspire your work here.

Staff members at the National Trust sorted through the hundreds of ideas that we’ve heard so far in listening sessions and synthesized the results into seven over-arching goals for our mutual consideration. These goals are reflective of our time, and they envision a more sustainable, accessible, relevant, and inclusive future for our field. For each of these goals, we’ll be sharing examples of specific crowd-sourced actions that can help make them a reality. We hope all of the crowd-sourced actions for each of the draft goals will help you envision your own role in leading the change. We also know that work is already being done around the country to advance these goals, and we look forward to highlighting case studies for each of them.

For example, a Denver neighborhood expanded its preservation tools by using community engagement and the city’s new “cultural criteria” to create the La Alma Lincoln Park Historic Cultural District, just recently approved by the Denver City Council. The new cultural district expands the period of significance of the district to cover a full century; it evaluates integrity where 20th-century modifications are as relevant as the original vernacular design; and it uses customized design guidelines that reflect the layers of history that are visible. In Rochester, New York, the Landmark Society of Western New York is helping to tell a truer history through its LGBTQ Landmarks Initiative, which has identified landmarks of
significance in the history of the city’s LGBTQ community—and which recognizes their importance both historically and culturally. In Georgia, a new program of the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation called Georgia Trust GREEN is supporting climate resilience by using a three-step process to educate, guide, and certify energy conservation improvements for historic homes.

As we seek to advance the goal of building collaborative networks, I am especially proud of our partnership with the National Preservation Partners Network to create new, practical resources for education and advocacy in four distinct and vitally important areas. The Preservation Priorities Task Force is focused on four specific areas:

- Affordable Housing and Density
- Diversity, Inclusion, and Racial Justice
- Preservation Trades and Workforce Development
- Sustainability and Climate Action

Our work together on this impact agenda for change isn’t finished. I’m counting on all of you to participate in sessions during and after the conference to continue shaping this dynamic roadmap for change. The National Trust will also be making commitments of our own resources to support the goals of “Leading the Change Together.”

For example, through new Climate Action Grants for the National Trust Historic Sites we own, we are helping visitors understand the inherent resilience of historic places and how innovative preservation practices can meet the challenges of climate change. At three of our sites—Lyndhurst, Wilson House, and Oatlands—historical climate control systems have been closed, removed, or no longer function. Through these grants, environmental engineers will help us reactivate these original features to work with smart technology, and then share this work with the public.

Another way the National Trust demonstrates this new agenda for change is by ensuring that the stories we tell at our own historic sites reflect the full true history of those places. To give just one small example, as part of our Where Women Made History campaign, later this month the Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois—long
celebrated as the modernist masterpiece of architect Mies van der Rohe—will be rededicated and renamed the Edith Farnsworth House. This change is being made to acknowledge and celebrate the key role that Edith played in the creation and design of the iconic structure. Edith was an engaged and visionary partner in the creation of this structure, and for decades her story has not been given the prominence it deserves.

The National Trust is also committed to helping others tell the true history of historic places through a new grant program. To aid in their pandemic recovery, we are assisting a broad range of nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and state and local agencies doing humanities-based work to interpret and preserve historic places that tell our full, true history. Grants of $25,000 to $50,000 are made possible by the National Endowment for the Humanities under an initiative titled “Sustaining the Humanities through the American Rescue Plan.” Funding will be awarded in these four categories: encompassing research for interpretation; landmark designations; architectural design and planning; and training workshops to preserve and interpret historic places of importance to all Americans.
The National Trust’s federal advocacy efforts also recognize the places that tell our full history. This work includes support for establishing the World War II Amache National Historic Site in Colorado as a unit of the National Park System in order to interpret and preserve resources associated with the incarceration of American citizens of Japanese ancestry during the Second World War. Our federal advocacy work also includes support for expanded recognition of sites that reflect the full story of the courageous activism that led to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision through direct affiliation with the National Park Service.

Additionally, we support critical funding resources for preservation at the federal level. Funding for historic preservation is at an all-time high, and in his first budget proposal, President Biden recommended the highest level of funding for the Historic Preservation Fund ever. We are very encouraged that the House and Senate are equally supportive of historic preservation and are poised to enact significantly more funding for the Historic Preservation Fund than at any point in its history.

Of course, another critical funding source for preservation is the federal historic tax credit, and Congress has the opportunity to enact the most substantive improvements to the incentive in more than a generation. Provisions to strengthen the credit were included in legislation developed by the House Ways and Means Committee,
and they are currently under consideration on the Hill as part of the budget reconciliation package. The proposed changes would be transformative for preservation projects in big cities and small towns. They would also help to advance President Biden’s Build Back Better agenda, by increasing the adaptive reuse of historic structures and providing solutions to some of our greatest challenges—for example, by creating new units of affordable housing and lowering carbon emissions.

Our success is far from guaranteed, however, and we need everyone to reach out to their members of Congress, and to urge their support for these improvements to the federal historic tax credit. Let’s send a clear message to Congress that strengthening the historic tax credit is a critical piece of infrastructure reform with far-reaching benefits for all communities. Let’s remind our elected officials that building reuse is a powerful form of climate action.

This conference provides an ongoing opportunity to reflect on the goals identified in “Leading the Change Together,” as well as our shared progress towards meeting those goals. I see PastForward 2022 and 2023 as opportunities to revisit these goals and to hold ourselves accountable to meeting them.

I would like to end my brief remarks here today with a request. This common agenda for change is a work in progress. Please take time to read this first iteration of “Leading the Change Together,” and then please share your own thoughts about these crowd-sourced ideas. We hope the lessons you learn over the next three days will have long-lasting impacts on our movement and in your own communities!

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