PastForward Online 2022 Conference Proceedings: From Vision to Action
Good afternoon, everyone. I’m Paul Edmondson, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and it’s my pleasure to welcome you to the 2022 PastForward Conference. PastForward is the National Trust’s most important annual gathering of leaders, decisionmakers, and practitioners in this field—a chance for us to join in conversations about creative options for preservation, to explore effective solutions to the challenges we all face, and to share our experiences of how preservation can catalyze communities.

As Dr. Gabrielle Tayac, historian at the Smithsonian Institution and a member of the Piscataway Nation reminds us, “You are always part of a larger story—you are rarely, if ever, going into a place where no one has ever been.” I am speaking to you from Washington, D.C., which was built on the unceded lands of the Nacotchtank and Piscataway people. We respectfully acknowledge that we are on their traditional territory, and we recognize and honor the cultural traditions of those Native American communities—past, present, and future.

Our conference today continues a long history of convenings by the National Trust, beginning with a gathering in April 1947, setting in motion a tradition that lives on today as our Annual Meeting and Conference.

That spring, some 75 years ago, representatives from dozens of leading historic, cultural, and preservation organizations met in the still-new National Gallery of Art. David Finley, soon to be the National Trust’s founding chair, was the director of the National Gallery and served as host.

Participants discussed their shared challenges and concerns about the state of historic preservation in the United States. But more importantly, they contemplated a bold vision for the future, in which preserving historic places would be a shared priority and a shared effort across the country. A national effort, and a national movement.
Central to this goal was the creation of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, chartered by Congress two years later. Expanding the ways in which we preserve places would fall to the leaders who came after, and to all of you here today. We are always pushing forward to resolve threats and explore opportunities, to save more places, to learn more from one another, and to build a better future together.

If we were in person today, at this point in my remarks I might ask you to look around the room to recognize some of your fellow participants. Since we are virtual, I’d like to use the power of this digital platform to introduce you to just a few of the many participants in this year’s conference.

First of all, I would like to share some numbers with you, and also to acknowledge some of the many organizations that are joining us today. We have more than 780 organizations represented, including state agencies and preservation organizations, historical societies and historic sites, museums, foundations, universities, federal agencies, architects, consulting firms, and Tribal groups. Welcome all.

We have a number of longtime attendees, and I thank you for your loyalty. Of about 2,000 participants, almost 6 percent present have been attending for more than a decade. We’re also pleased to welcome many first-time attendees—32 percent of you are new to PastForward, which is a wonderful sign for the future. Welcome.

Participants from 14 countries are also joining us. And from the westernmost point in the United States—and the furthest destination from Washington, D.C. —we celebrate our delegation of friends from Guam. We apologize for the fact that it is the middle of the night for you. In any case, welcome!

To ensure that we continue to invest in the future of preservation, the National Trust developed a Diversity Scholarship program 30 years ago. This program elevates preservationists from groups that have been historically under-represented in our movement. Please welcome our 300 Diversity Scholars, who take their place among more than 2,500 scholars that we have hosted over the last 30 years.
There are many past alumni from the Diversity Scholars program who are leading in the preservation world. I want to point out just two of them: Mtamanika Youngblood and LeJuano Varnell, who are joining us from Atlanta. Mtamanika is chair emeritus and LeJuano the executive director of Sweet Auburn Works, helping to revitalize one of Atlanta’s most important historic districts. I also know Mtamanika well from her service on our board of trustees. Thank you both for joining us, and thanks to all the Diversity Scholar alumni who are advancing our work across the country.

Please also join me in thanking all the speakers and session participants you’ll meet over the next three days. They are here sharing their knowledge so we can grow together. To all our speakers: We are grateful to you for sharing your talents, your skills, and your experience with all of us.

Before we begin the deep learning and exchanges of the conference, I want to talk briefly about some of the work carried out by the National Trust since we were last together. We watched closely as the pandemic continued to change the landscape of our everyday routines and impact those who are the most vulnerable. We have also watched the deepening social and political divisions in our country, and we firmly believe that our work can create a unifying place for all to feel welcome and included.

At the National Trust, we currently organize our efforts around five major categories of work: advocating for places; stewarding historic sites; grantmaking for greatest impact; addressing inequities; and engaging a new generation of preservationists.

First, in collaboration with so many of you across the country, we advocate for saving places. This ranges from complex legal cases that can take many years to resolve, to the expansive campaigns of our annual 11 Most Endangered Historic Places list.
Each year, the 11 Most Endangered Historic Places list plays a critical role in raising awareness about threatened historic sites—and often it is the impetus for protecting those places. With more than 300 sites spotlighted over the years, fewer than 5 percent have been lost.

For example, Rassawek, located in Virginia at the confluence of the James and Rivanna rivers, is the historic capital of the Monacan Nation. In 2020, we placed Rassawek on the National Trust’s list of 11 Most Endangered Historic Places, when the James River Water Authority proposed to install a water intake and pumping station on the site. Our listing boosted efforts by the Monacan Indian Nation and our preservation colleagues in Virginia, and ultimately, the James River Water Authority voted this past March to choose an alternative site, protecting the sanctity of this important place.

And, just last week, we and our partners in Arizona celebrated another win that had been the subject of an 11 Most listing this year. Camp Naco is a former military camp along the U.S.-Mexico border that once housed units of the all-Black cavalry known as the “Buffalo Soldiers.” After years of deterioration, Camp Naco will receive a $4.6 million grant from the state of Arizona for critical stabilization and rehabilitation. This has been a major effort over the last several months involving local and congressional officials, preservation partners in Arizona, and the Arizona State Historic Preservation Office. Congratulations all!
One of the 11 Most Endangered Historic Places this year that is still at risk is the Minidoka National Historic Site in Jerome, Idaho, where the U.S. government held 13,000 Japanese Americans who were forcibly relocated during World War II from western states. Minidoka still needs our help, this time because it is threatened by a massive wind farm project. I hope you’ll join the National Trust, the Friends of Minidoka, and other partners in urging the Bureau of Land Management to protect this important place.

Since the National Trust’s beginning, stewarding historic sites has been central to our work. And of course, this work isn’t just about preserving historic buildings, landscapes, and collections, but also about using them to engage the public in creative ways that help us address issues important in our world today.

At Lyndhurst, in Tarrytown, New York, we recently presented “Women’s Work,” a groundbreaking exhibit marking the connections between women artists—from the domestic handicraft traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries to contemporary art. At Lyndhurst, visitors to “Women’s Work” encountered more than 125 objects and art pieces produced by an inclusive group of women artists, from Dolley Madison to Yoko Ono.

At Belle Grove, in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, artist-in-residence Jerome Bias brought his skill in furniture-making to this site of enslavement to expand its interpretation. As he built a China press, Bias shared his own story and the stories of African American cabinetmakers in the 19th century. He also held open-hearth cooking demonstrations, including a special meal for the descendants of people who were enslaved at Belle Grove.

At Filoli, a National Trust Historic Site in Woodside, California, a new site-wide exhibition explored Filoli’s evolution from a watershed
valley dotted with creek-side Ohlone villages, to a reservoir
supplying water to the post-Gold Rush population of San Fran-
cisco. Throughout the house and garden, this exhibit connects
California’s water history with the challenges of today, and the
need to take action to ensure a sustainable future.

These are just a few examples of how stewarding our National
Trust Historic Sites means telling their stories in ways that connect
with the world we live in today.

Over the past year, the National Trust has also expanded its
grantmaking to advance preservation work at historic places across
the United States. With the broadest range of preservation grant-
making programs in the country, the National Trust provides
funding and technical expertise to organizations and institutions
that are positioned to create meaningful impacts in their
communities.

For example, in partnership with the National Endowment for
the Humanities, we created the Telling the Full History Preservation
Fund, made possible through the American Rescue Plan Act of
2021. This grant program is helping organizations interpret and
preserve historic places representing our full shared history. With
$2.5 million in grants awarded to 80 organizations across 39 states,
these projects demonstrate how preservation is a powerful tool for
advancing justice and equity.

In 2021, in response to pandemic-related challenges
being experienced by smaller historic restaurants in cities
across America, the National Trust developed an exciting
initiative with our
longtime corporate partner—
American Express—to benefit
these important community
assets. In the last two years,
we have awarded $2 million to
50 small historic restaurants,

Antoines Restaurant, New Orleans, LA.
PHOTO COURTESY AMERICAN EXPRESS
helping to ensure that these historic community anchors will endure.

In all of our work, we know that evolving the profession and the focus of historic preservation to rectify past inequities within the preservation movement is also critical to our shared future. Doing so calls for a proactive approach, and we’ve created a number of special funds, initiatives, and programs that address the areas of greatest need through the application of resources, attention, and technical expertise.

Of course, one of the most impactful ways that we are doing this is through the incredible work of the National Trust’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, which is celebrating its fifth anniversary this year. Through the Action Fund, we are helping to preserve and lift up places that have been overlooked in American history—places that represent centuries of African American activism, achievement, and resilience. To date, more than $80 million has been raised in support of hundreds of preservation projects nationally.

For example, for the second year in a row, funding from the Mellon Foundation has allowed us to award more than half a million dollars in grants to Historically Black Colleges and Universities to support preservation planning on their historic campuses. Also this year, with the support of the Lilly Endowment, we began our Preserving Black Churches program, which offers a national strategy to support those institutions, which are profoundly important in American history and in our communities and our country today. A key component of this new program is grant funding, and we received more than 1,200 applications in the inaugural grant round for this program. We look forward to announcing these awards on Martin Luther King Jr. Day this coming January.

Building on ongoing work to identify current threats to America’s Chinatowns, we recently launched a new effort to help document these important cultural resources and to articulate why these cultural and business districts must be saved. Our initial findings show that historic Chinatowns take many forms, from the bustling density of major urban centers, to smaller Chinese communities in rural landscapes—many of which are represented by single
streets or just a few buildings. We look forward to sharing more about this growing effort as we make progress.

Finally, we recognize that we must constantly attract, engage, and expand a new generation of preservationists.

We are doing this through programs such as our HOPE Crew, our youth enrichment and workforce development program, providing opportunities for young people, volunteers, and veterans to develop skills in preservation trades. HOPE stands for “Hands-On Preservation Experience,” and our HOPE Crew projects provide needed help in the form of preservation-in-action. Recent projects include engaging young people in restoring masonry at a hospital first established for people enslaved on St. Croix; another project has been documenting Black heritage sites in Washington, D.C.; and another has focused on restoring cabinetry at the Modernist House of Tomorrow in Indiana.

Thanks to a generous gift from a longtime donor and his family, we are expanding K-12 civics education programs at our National Trust Historic Sites. As we begin to build out the Marder-Vaughn
Center for Historic Sites Interpretation & Education, we are conducting new research on the histories of our sites and developing new partnerships through teacher-in-residence programs. This initiative came from the vision of the late Stan Marder that historic sites provide an ideal environment for young people to examine and engage with our shared civic values.

While these are only a few examples of our work, you can see that we continue to make strides in saving places, supporting communities, and connecting people to our past and our future through historic places. And that vision of a national movement reflected in that organizing meeting at the National Gallery some 75 years ago is still our guiding principal, and has never been more relevant than it is today.

On behalf of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, I am pleased to welcome you to PastForward, and I am deeply honored to have all of you as colleagues in this important work. FJ

PAUL EDMONDSON is the former president and CEO of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (2019-2023).