

Building a Career in Historic Preservation

Historic Preservation is a field dedicated to the preservation and management of the historic built environment and cultural landscapes. It involves safeguarding and interpreting historic buildings, structures, and sites that reflect our shared cultural heritage. In the U.S., buildings and sites 50 years of age and older may be considered historic. Historic sites are regularly preserved through varying local, state, or national regulatory frameworks and interpreted with the assistance of historic contexts and site-specific research.

Potential Roles

- Architectural Historian
- Archivist
- Historic Preservation Urban or Regional Planner
- Cultural Resource Manager
- Historic Preservation Specialist
- Landscape Architect or Landscape Historian
- Tribal Liaison
- Preservation Architect (Architecture degree required)
- Preservation Trades
- National Register of Historic Places Specialist
- Historic Preservation Tax Credit Specialist
- Preservation Law Advocate
- Public Outreach and Education



Required Training

Bachelor's Degree

Some U.S. universities offer undergraduate degrees in Historic/Heritage Preservation, although degrees offered at the graduate level may build on skills acquired as an historian, architect, or planner. Students seeking a career in historic preservation should consider undergraduate programs in the social sciences such as anthropology or archaeology, history, urban planning, architecture, or engineering. While graduate training is required for most professional and management roles, undergraduate degrees may position job seekers for a wide array of entry level roles in museums, historic sites, municipal government, as well as research assistants under the guidance of a graduate level preservationist and internship positions at [cultural resource management](#) firms.

Master's in Historic Preservation

Due to the professional standards specified by the Secretary of the Interior, an MA in history, architecture, or a closely aligned field is typically required. Many preservation projects involve public funding (i.e., federal, state, county, or municipal). To maintain consistency across the U.S., professional qualifications are outlined in the [Secretary of the Interior Professional Qualifications Standards](#) under 36 CFR Part 61. While not always required, many positions in state or municipal governments require training to these standards. At the master's level, students can choose areas of focus. Consider whether you are interested in working in research, fieldwork, or government compliance and cultural resource management, or whether you want to attend a program that focuses on conservation and materials science.

PhD Degree

Doctoral level studies are not required for a successful career in historic preservation. Those pursuing a PhD degree have traditionally targeted academic positions. Recently, however, doctorate-level researchers have been securing roles within the cultural resource management and historic preservation industries. Many academic preservation departments across the country are spearheaded by graduate level professionals and practitioners who offer industry and professional expertise in the classroom.



Working in Historic Preservation with an Anthropology Degree

In the 1950s, Gordon Willey and Philip Phillips proclaimed “archaeology is anthropology, or it is nothing” which successfully shifted archaeological research towards a human based approach. This people-centric way of thinking revolutionized the field of archaeology and was rooted in understanding the human element of objects from the past. Similarly, historic preservation has the potential to benefit greatly by the participation of those trained in the social sciences like anthropology. After all, historic communities were developed by people for people. Understanding societal change and social trends can help provide context for historic research and the people and cultures associated with the built or modified environment.

Universities are beginning to provide dual training for these very reasons. Examples include the University of Georgia’s Double Dawg program that combines an Anthropology BA and Historic Preservation MHP, or the University of Maryland’s combined program that provides a Master of Applied Anthropology and a Master of Historic Preservation. This unique approach to training is ideal for jobs in historic preservation such as:

State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) or Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

Many with careers in historic preservation have successfully served as SHPOs. Because each state’s SHPO inevitably develops relationships with stakeholders and constituents, the people-centered approach from anthropological training contributes significantly to careers in historic preservation in public service. Additionally, managing staff at a SHPO or similar office entails managing both preservationists and archaeologists. Anthropological training can help inform the work that the archaeological staff do and highlight the approaches they take in their work.

Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO)

THPOs are responsible for preserving, protecting, and managing cultural heritage on tribal lands. They regularly serve as the official voice in consultation with federal agencies on undertakings that may impact sacred sites, ancestral lands, and cultural resources associated with Tribal Nations. Those with a degree in anthropology can strengthen this work by virtue of their understanding of cultural practices, preservation methods, and ethnographic research. Anthropological training enhances the ability of THPOs to document heritage and traditions, and advocate for culturally-appropriate preservation strategies.

Federal Preservation Officer

Very similar to SHPOs, each federal agency has a Federal Preservation Officer responsible for coordinating that agency's preservation program which includes all types of historic resources. Anthropological training will not only assist with the cultural competency necessary for relationship building with Tribal Nations and various stakeholders, but also provides a more comprehensive understanding of the types of resources involved in cultural resources management.

Team leadership in Cultural Resource Management

In private industry, anthropological training can assist with the background research necessary for comprehensive cultural resource research and evaluations. It has the potential to increase a preservation researcher's capacity to develop important research questions or highlight contexts that help determine the eligibility of resources for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. Such evaluations are the backbone of many historic preservation programs.

Legislation to know

The following regulations provide the frameworks under which historic preservation is practiced in the U.S. Whether they are used for future planning purposes or ensuring government projects do not disturb sites important to our shared heritage, multiple levels of preservation legislation play a role in protecting cultural resources.



- **National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA)** – The NHPA, including its several amendments, is a hallmark piece of legislation guiding U.S. preservation efforts. In addition to providing the framework for Section 106 review, which ensures that federal agencies consider their impacts to historic resources, it also created the National Register of Historic Places. Familiarity with NHPA is required at all levels of government and private sector cultural resource management.
- **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** – Historic resource compliance work is regularly coordinated with NEPA, making historic preservation professionals instrumental to environmental compliance. It is similar to NHPA in its role in ensuring the federal government considers environmental impacts.
- **Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)** – Enacted in 1990, NAGPRA provides for the protection and repatriation of Native American ancestors, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony.
- **African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act** – Passed in 2022, this Act establishes a program within the National Park Service to provide grant funding and technical assistance for the identification, research, preservation, and interpretation of historic African American burial grounds.
- **Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives Program** – Administered jointly by the National Park Service and Internal Revenue Service, this program encourages private investment in the rehabilitation of historic buildings by offering income tax credits for the certified rehabilitation of income producing properties.

- **Local historic preservation ordinances** – Local city and county ordinances are the foundation of local preservation planning. They enable governments to provide oversight, technical assistance, and sometimes tax relief or funding for locally designated individual properties and historic districts.
- **State level environmental policies** – In addition to federal regulations, many state governments mimic NHPA and NEPA in their efforts to ensure that government actions consider historic resources. Among the states prioritizing these policies are Georgia with the Georgia Environmental Policy Act and California with the California Environmental Quality Act. Preservation jobs in outdoor recreation and transportation planning regularly involve familiarity with state level regulations.



Additional Professional and Informational Resources

The websites of the following organizations contain information that is fundamental to understanding how preservation is practiced in the U.S. In addition to learning tools, grant information, and legislative actions, the National Park Service's website is the primary resource for National Register of Historic Places and Secretary of the Interior materials that help guide professional practice in historic preservation.

- [National Park Service](#): This agency administers a significant number of preservation programs, including those that involve documenting resources, designating resources, and tax credit and grant opportunities. The agency's website includes extensive information and is a vital source in understanding how the profession functions in the U.S.
- [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#): This historic preservation organization is the oldest that is national in scope.
- [Preservation Action](#): This organization keeps abreast of legislative matters that concern historic preservation. It sometimes leads volunteers in advocacy efforts.
- [UNESCO](#): The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization promotes international collaboration and sharing, including preservation professionals worldwide.
- [ICOMOS](#): The International Council on Monuments and Sites is dedicated to applying best practices to the conservation of tangible and intangible cultural properties. ICOMOS provides technical advice to UNESCO about preservation practices.
- [NAPC](#): The National Alliance of Preservation Commissions provides a network for municipalities to share historic preservation practices.

Important Features of Historic Preservation

- Historic preservation professionals never work alone. Preservation work is carried out by subject matter experts working with environmental planners, urban planners, historians, architects, project managers, engineers, archaeologists, and Geographic Information System (GIS) analysts.
- Cross training (i.e., taking interdisciplinary classes during graduate school) will expose students to complementary skillsets and frameworks reflected in professional practice. Consider taking coursework aligned with your interests in fields such as urban planning, public policy and administration, non-profit leadership, GIS, or real estate development.
- Organizations such as the National Preservation Institute or your State Historic Preservation Office offer training courses that cover preservation law, best practices, and historic preservation tax credit training. These training sessions regularly bring together professionals from across regions to share insights and best practices.
- Some preservation programs are designed with current working professionals in mind, offering evening coursework. If you are working while taking classes, consider positions that will provide relevant skills sought after in historic preservation such as project management, research, budgeting, outreach and communications, grant writing, and reviewing architectural plans or renderings.

