

# How to Start a Historic Preservation Project

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## How-To Guides

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Welcome to the world of historic preservation, where the stories and legacies of our past are safeguarded for future generations. This guide is designed to support individuals and communities in South Carolina in preserving their African American heritage. Whether you're new to the field or looking to deepen your involvement, the steps outlined below will assist you in making significant contributions to preserving the cultural and historical landscape of South Carolina.

### What is historic preservation?

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Historic preservation is a movement and field of study, as well as a specific set of processes, which identifies, protects, and preserves historic resources. Historic resources most commonly include historically significant buildings and sites, but can also include landscapes, no longer existing spaces, artifacts, cemeteries, entire neighborhoods or towns, and more.

African American historic resources are less often preserved than traditionally white historic resources. One of the key reasons for this is that the historic preservation movement was not built for Black history or people. Historic preservation as a field is often cited as beginning in the mid 1800's, and during this time, those doing historic preservation were much less concerned with historical accuracy or truth, but about using a historic building to show a particular racist view of the past. Many African American communities have been fighting in the face of this to preserve their historic spaces for generations, and that effort continues today. For more on the history of historic preservation and the Toolkit's understanding of preservation, [click here](#).

### *What can you do with historic preservation?*

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In SC African American communities, preservation means lots of things and is not limited to structures and old buildings. It might include saving artifacts, telling stories (oral histories), and documenting your family history (genealogy). It includes recognizing the fabric of communities and traditions that have been lost or actively erased through the preservation of the tangible things that are left.

### *So what can you do with historic preservation?*

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***You can:***

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- Preserve buildings – such as historic churches, Rosenwald or Equalization Schools, Civil Rights sites, HBCUs, hospitals/clinics, libraries, or homes.
- Preserve neighborhoods, communities, cultural landscapes, or other community spaces that are not limited to just one specific building.
- Preserve historic spaces that are no longer standing – in historic preservation lingo, an *extant site* is one that is still standing or still exists today, while a site that does not exist anymore is *no longer extant*, or an *intangible resource*. One example is preserving a historic space that is no longer extant through a historical marker.
- Get a national designation – such as getting listed on the National Register of Historic Places (see more in our guide on the National Register).
- Get protections for a historic space – this might include getting listed on the National Register, getting included in a local historic district, establishing a preservation covenant for a site, an easement or others.
- Do physical rehabilitation or restoration work – technical and physical work to a structure to help preserve it, usually done by professional experts.
- Preserve stories – you might preserve your family’s history through genealogy or preserving family artifacts, or you might document the story of your family or community through oral history (for more, see our guide on Genealogy, our guide on Artifacts, and our guide on Oral History.)
- Get support and funding – all preservation projects will need both funding and support from a team to succeed.

### 3 R’s of historic preservation

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There are generally 3 types of physical historic preservation work that are specific to historic sites, often referred to as the 3 R’s. Each of these types has a set of Standards issued by the National Park Service, which are the standards adhered to by all preservation projects.

There is an additional fourth type – preservation – which refers mostly to ongoing maintenance and repair, rather than extensive work.

**Rehabilitation** – makes necessary updates and changes to a historic structure to make it suitable for modern use (as an apartment building, store, restaurant, etc), while still preserving the building’s historic character. Some projects in this category that are historic buildings rehabilitated to a new modern use are called adaptive reuse projects.

**Restoration** – returns a historic site to how it appeared at a certain point in time, allowing the removal of features from other time periods. This is most often used to restore a historic site by removing more modern features.

**Reconstruction** – recreates a no longer extant or vanished historic site using new materials. It is not a historic structure but represents one for interpretative purposes.

**Note:** Traditionally, renovation is not seen as a historic preservation process. Renovation refers to a non-historic process that renovates a site for modern use, typically without including preservation concerns for the structure's historic character. The above 3 R's are used instead.

For more information, [see the National Park Service full descriptions and standards here.](#)

## **Now what? Steps to Begin Your Preservation Project:**

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### ***Identify your space – what do you want to preserve?***

1. Start by identifying buildings, sites, or artifacts that hold historical significance. These could range from historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Rosenwald or Equalization schools, sites connected to civil rights history, to historic homes and churches.
2. Consider places of cultural importance within the community, such as locations that have hosted significant events, gatherings, or have been central to the development of the community's identity and heritage.
3. Pay attention to sites that are in danger of demolition, neglect, or are in need of urgent conservation efforts. These sites often need immediate attention to protect and preserve them for future generations.
4. Look at our Projects Map of preservation projects across the state to see what other communities are preserving and get ideas.
5. Learn the history of your community – ask family, friends, and others in the community who hold knowledge about the history, listen to their stories, research information, read books, etc. Learning the history will help you know what sites are important to your community's story and will make you familiar with the built landscape of your community.

### ***Identify what you know and what you don't know***

1. What do you know about the space? What history do you know and what does your community hold as knowledge or understanding about the space?

It will be helpful down the line to write up this history or keep a record of it – future funders and partners will want to see this and it will help you convey the story of your site.

- What are you missing in the history of the space? What gaps in knowledge or the historical record are there?

It is helpful to make a list of the gaps you need to fill or what your research needs are.

- Things to consider:

- **Property and Ownership:** Who owns the property or the building? Is the building and surrounding property owned together or separately? Where do the property lines fall? Is everything you want to preserve on one piece of property or multiple? Is the property owner willing to have historic preservation efforts undertaken?
- **Structural Integrity:** What is the current condition of the space? Is it safe to be in and use or is it in a rough state? Do you need to bring in an expert to assess the condition?

### ***Research and Documentation***

1. **Conduct thorough research** to uncover the history of the site or artifact. Utilize local archives, libraries, oral histories, and other resources to document its significance. Keep a journal to track any leads, new developments, or critical information that aid in the telling of a fuller story about the historic building or site.
2. **Take detailed photographs** of the site from various angles and conditions to create a visual record. If using outside photographs, be sure to secure the proper rights/permissions for its use and provide citations accordingly.
3. **Explore applying for official designation**, such as a local historical marker program or listing on the National Register of Historic Places or the South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office. Such designations can offer legal protection and access to funding. See our guides on the National Register and Historical Markers.

### ***Finding the right partners and building a team***

1. You can't do this alone – Who in your community is joining you in this effort? Who would be good to bring on board for their particular knowledge set or expertise?

Create a group or committee of people invested in the project, hold regular meetings, assign specific roles, get organized. You can consider creating a non-profit organization as well down the road.

- **Local Historical Societies and other Interest Groups:** Connect with local historical societies, heritage groups, historic nonprofits, preservation organizations, etc. They can provide valuable resources, historical context, and support. Make sure that they support your vision for the project and are on board with your goals.
- **Statewide Organizations:** There are several statewide or regional organizations that work on historic preservation projects – Preservation SC, Conservation Voters of SC, Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, and WeGOJA Foundation are just a few examples.
- **State Agencies:** The South Carolina Department of Archives and History can be a valuable partner in preservation efforts, offering guidance, grants, and technical assistance. Your county may be able to provide support as well.
- **National Organizations:** The National Trust for Historic Preservation, especially its African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, offers grants and resources focused on preserving places where African American history happened.

- Community Groups: Engage with community organizations, churches, and schools to garner support and mobilize volunteers for preservation projects.
- Find your local history and historic preservation leaders – who can you turn to for advice or input when you're stuck?

### ***Establish your goals***

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1. What is it you want out of this project?

Is it a preserved building? Is it more extensive historical research? Is it a National Register Nomination? A Historical Marker? An interpretative center or community center? An oral history project?

2. What are your long term goals vs short term goals?

3. Think about the longevity

- Is this an ongoing effort? Or does it have a defined timeline?
- Once a building is restored, what will it be used for?
- Who will maintain the building? How will its ongoing maintenance be paid for?
- Who will own the property?

4. If it is all of these things or many of them, and you are a big dreamer with long term goals (which is great!), **break it into manageable stages**

- For example, for many projects a first stage is getting on the National Register because of the protections and funding opportunities it can help provide. So your first stage might be obtaining a National Register nomination, which usually takes a couple years or sometimes more. In the meantime, you could look at placing a Historical Marker at the site, which is typically a shorter process.
- Actual physical restoration work takes a lot of time, money, effort, and experts – if this is your goal, plan ahead for a long project with multiple stages
- *TIP:* Know that historic preservation projects, particularly ones that involve physical preservation of structures or buildings, are multi-year and sometimes multi-decade projects. **This is for the long haul so do not go in expecting you can restore a building in a year.** You need to set yourself and your team up for success by establishing a plan and dividing the work, without causing yourself to burn out too early and lose steam.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

1. **Ensure that the community is involved** and supportive of preservation efforts. Respect and incorporate their input, recognizing that these sites are part of their heritage and identity as well.

2. **Approach preservation with sensitivity to the complex histories and narratives** associated with African American heritage sites, acknowledging their significance in the broader context of American history.
3. **Consider the environmental impact of preservation activities.** Utilize sustainable practices and materials that do not compromise the historical integrity of the site and that meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

***Think and plan on how you're going to pay for it***

1. Preservation projects – especially those that are undertaking physical and technical restoration work – are incredibly expensive.
2. **Seek out grants** specifically aimed at historic preservation projects. The National Park Service, for example, offers various grants for preservation projects. The National Trust for Historic Preservation also funds a great deal of preservation work and is a good resource for information. Visit your local and State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for more specific updates regarding funding and/or training and workshop opportunities. For more, see our Grant Match tool here.
3. There are several types of funding structures that exist in the field of historic preservation. The first three included here are quite complicated and require in-depth know-how and legal advice. This is just meant to give you some basic terminology to work with.

Revolving funds

1. A revolving fund is a pool of funding run by an organization that is used to obtain a historic property through purchase or donation, save and/or restore the property, then sell the property back to an owner, with any profits being put into the purchase of the next historic property – hence revolving. Some organizations will sell back the property to a community for a reasonable rate, thus securing ownership for the community rather than a developer. This is a complex process and varies greatly.
  2. For more, check out [this information from the National Preservation Partners Network](#) or [this handbook on revolving funds from National Trust for Historic Preservation](#).
- Protective Easements and Covenants
    1. Preservation easements are “a voluntary legal agreement, typically in the form of a deed, which permanently protects a significant historic property” (NPS). An easement placed on a property ensures that the current owner and any future owners cannot destroy the historical integrity of the property, which is enforced by the organization (usually a preservation non-profit or even a public agency) to which the easement is “granted.” These have less to do with direct funding, but have to do with ownership and longevity planning.

2. Covenants are “a formal agreement between the State Historic Preservation Office and the owner of a historic property in which the owner agrees to ensure the maintenance and preservation of the architectural and historical characteristics that qualify the property as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.”
  3. Covenants differ from easements in that an easement is a right to use another’s land without acquiring any ownership of said land. In contrast, a covenant includes an interest in the land.
  4. For more, see [this page from National Preservation Partners Network](#) and [this handbook on easements from the National Park Service](#) and the [SCDAH SHPO Architectural Covenants](#).
- Historic tax credits
    1. Historic tax credits are incentives offered by the federal and state government to encourage the rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of historic buildings, rather than tearing them down to build new buildings. The Federal Historic Rehabilitation tax credit is 20%. The State of SC has a 10% State Rehabilitation tax credit with a 25% option.
    2. For more on the federal tax incentive, [see this page from the National Park Service](#). For more on the SC state tax incentive, [see this pdf from SCDAH](#).
  - Grants
    1. Grants for historic preservation come in all shapes and sizes, from large national funders (like National Trust for Historic Preservation or the National Park Service) to state funding to local and regional funders. Some grants are specific to historic preservation projects, while others are more broad to historical and cultural work. Read our guide on grants to find out more.
    2. See which grants match your project using our Grant Match Tool.

### ***Identify who can help you***

#### 1. Do you need an expert?

- For projects that involve physical preservation work, it is best to **hire professionals with expertise in historic preservation**, such as preservation architects, builders, or consultants.
- It may be helpful to hire an expert to do historical research on the space you are preserving.
- It is often useful to hire a professional to do a historic site assessment of the condition of the structure.
- If you are applying for the National Register, it can be helpful to hire a professional who has experience in doing these nominations as it can be complex and lengthy, with very specific requirements. Someone who is familiar with this process can help you navigate pitfalls.

- If your project is complex, it is worthwhile to consider hiring a preservation professional to help guide you.
- Search our Experts database to find preservation professionals and community leaders.
- Paid work vs volunteer
  - It is a chronic problem in historic preservation that the vast majority of folks leading projects in their communities go unpaid. It contributes to the lack of young people involved in these projects, and perpetuates issues of equity and funding.
  - **Don't assume that everyone can help you for free.** Professionals rely on this work as their career, and while many are willing to offer advice, tips, or point you in the right direction, it isn't fair to ask for free labor. Funding is tight in this field for everyone, so focus effort on getting grants or other funding so that you can hire who you need and ultimately be more successful.
  - That being said, you can **leverage community volunteers** for preservation projects. There are folks who are looking to get involved in projects on a volunteer basis and some folks may offer help pro bono. Engaging local universities and colleges can also provide additional resources and expertise.
- Use the SC Preservation Toolkit's Experts Database to find both professionals and community advocates/leaders!

### ***Identify help and resources***

1. Find specific resources on your type of preservation project on our Preservation Topics pages – we have pages on churches, historic schools, public buildings, neighborhoods/communities, cemeteries, oral histories, genealogy, and artifacts.
2. Find other similar projects through our Projects Map – reach out to them and ask for advice, resources, etc.
3. Connect with community organizations and other groups that might be helpful. Become a member of a Facebook group in your local community to build a network or access a larger network doing similar work. Join the [WeGOJA SC Preservation Toolkit](#) Facebook Group to learn more and connect.
4. Some relevant resources:
  - [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#): Provides a wealth of resources, including grants, for those looking to preserve historic places.
  - [African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund](#): A program of the National Trust focused on protecting and restoring places of African American heritage.
  - [South Carolina Department of Archives and History](#): Offers resources, grants, and guidance on historic preservation within the state.
  - [South Carolina African American Heritage Commission](#): Works to identify and preserve the cultural heritage of African Americans in South Carolina.



- Preservation South Carolina: A non-profit organization dedicated to preserving South Carolina's historic buildings and sites.

***Bonus – get involved in advocacy efforts!***

1. Get involved with advocating for how important it is to save our historic Black spaces and places.
2. Advocate locally – find out what is going on locally and speak to your city or county council. Create a grassroots advocacy group.
3. Advocate statewide – join statewide efforts to spread awareness about African American preservation. Join organizations that do this advocacy work and sign up for their newsletters, such as WeGOJA Foundation, Preservation SC, Conservation Voters of SC, etc.
4. Advocate nationally – look at the National Trust for Historic Preservation's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund for resources and ways to get involved. Sign up for their newsletters. Sign their petitions.

## **Explore Related Resources in the Toolkit**

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### **Need help researching & writing your nomination?**

[Check out the Experts Database.](#)

### **Want to explore funding opportunities?**

[Check out our Grants & Funding page.](#)

### **Want to pair your National Register Listing with a South Carolina Historical Marker?**

[Check out our How-To Guide on How To Get a State Historical Marker.](#)