

PROMOTING A JUST PRESERVATION MOVEMENT



The Henry B. Clarke House, Chicago, Illinois, 1836. Thanks to advocacy by Pastor Kevin Anthony Ford, preservation consultant and activist Elizabeth Blasius, and others, Bishop Louis Henry Ford is being recognized as Chicago's first preservationist. Bishop Louis and Margaret Ford purchased the Clarke House, the city's oldest residence, in 1941 and preserved and restored the building with the St. Paul's Church of God in Christ congregation. The Clarke House became one of Chicago's first local landmarks in 1970. Photo by Landmarks Illinois.

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Given the [imbedded injustice](#) in preservation policy and practice, we have a duty to dismantle and rethink these parts of our systems. We are perpetuating injustice if we fail to invest in change and build capacity where there has been inequity. People who have been excluded by these systems must play a pivotal role in shaping the movement toward a just future.

WHAT IS JUST PRESERVATION MOVEMENT?

Defining justice is important. Landmarks Illinois defines justice as the practice of being fair and reasonable and ensuring people receive the treatment or outcome they deserve based upon equity, ethics and the law. Therefore, a just preservation movement is one where people have accessible supports to achieve the outcomes they want for the places they value.

Some may argue that preservation tools are readily accessible. For example, anyone can, in theory, submit a National Register nomination. But in practice, the current process often requires either specialized knowledge or an inordinate amount of time and patience (and

available technical assistance) to be successful.¹ Additionally, if preservation practice was truly fair and accessible, designated historic properties would reflect the makeup of our nation. Prior to FY2014, the National Park Service found that only 8% of National Register sites reflect the stories of women, people of color and members of the LGBTQ community.² Since 2014, the National Park Service has awarded almost \$3 million in Underrepresented Communities (URC) grants to diversify National Register sites.³ Of the National Park Service's 18 grant programs, seven are now dedicated to recognizing the resources of underrepresented communities.⁴ In this way, the National Park Service is prioritizing equity in its grantmaking and providing a model for our field. This kind of equity is what is needed for preservation to be a just practice.

“There is incredible inequity in who gets the money, and even the preservation jobs.”

Justin Garrett Moore
former Executive Director,
New York City Public Design Commission
New York City, March 31, 2020 (Zoom)

JUSTICE IS RESPECTING DIFFERENT WAYS OF THINKING AND BEING

Equality is about equal opportunity, whereas equity is about fairness, that is, providing people with the support they need to achieve outcomes that are more equal.⁵ People differ in how we learn and engage. As such, people's needs and availabilities are different. We cannot simply engage with those stakeholders that have the most free time or the strongest feelings (and therefore greater likelihood of showing up) and call our job done. Respecting and accommodating differences is a baseline just practice. More equitable outcomes emerge when people are comfortable engaging in the process and feel that they have been heard.

One example is the opportunity and need to include indigenous peoples' voices in a just preservation movement.⁶ Justice and equity mean respecting the many beliefs about and concepts of land and land management, cultural practices, stories, ancestry and time. Telling the full American story, which preservationists almost unanimously support, starts with understanding the history of the land and how the historic places we are trying to save came to be there. Colonists and the United States government practiced unscrupulous and illegal tactics

¹ The National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) nomination rigor has changed from the beginning of the NRHP program. One could argue that the process was more equitable to nominators at the program's beginning due to the relative lack of required narrative and documentation compared to contemporary nominations.

² DeSantis, Mark K. "The Federal Role in Historic Preservation: An Overview." Congressional Research Service, R45800. Updated April 7, 2020. CRS-27. Accessed July 24, 2022. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R45800.pdf> Note that the report states that this data is "prior to FY2014." The federal fiscal year for 2014 began October 1, 2013.

³ "Underrepresented Communities Grants Opportunity." National Park Service. Accessed July 24, 2022. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/underrepresented-communities-grants-opportunity.htm>

⁴ "Cultural Resources Grants." National Park Service. Accessed July 24, 2022. <https://www.nps.gov/history/grants.htm>

⁵ Two images from this article show the difference between equality and equity. Accessed on July 24, 2022. <https://www.diffen.com/difference/Equality-vs-Equity>

⁶ For resources on tribal historic preservation programs, please consult the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (NATHPO) at <https://www.nathpo.org/>.

to take the land and lives from Indigenous people / American Indians / Native Americans and Pacific Islanders.⁷ Indigenous people/ American Indians / Native Americans / Pacific Islanders continue to live on the land and have ancestral claims and cultural and religious rights to land on which they may, or may not, live. They have a right to self-determination and agency to manage and participate in discussions about the land and the remains and resources both below and above ground. Several organizations have turned to land acknowledgements to promote truth. However, land acknowledgements are increasingly seen as reflexive and missing the larger responsibility to build genuine partnerships, allyship or co-conspiratorship that support Indigenous people and initiatives.

“We need equity for memory, non-tangibles, culture, tradition as much as places and buildings. We have the perspective of sacredness. Sacredness falls like rain, but it pools in places.”

Cheyenne St. John
Tribal Historic Preservation Officer
Lower Sioux Indian Community
Morton, MN, November 6, 2020 (Zoom)

JUSTICE IS TELLING THE FULL STORY – PAST AND PRESENT

It is important to tell the full story of our own work. Thousands of people who would not identify as preservationists are doing preservation every day. Though I argue that preservation practice is in the midst of a relevancy crisis, the fact is that maintenance, reinvestment and adaptive reuse happen with or without us. Preservation professionals do not entirely drive or manage the process. People have been preserving, repairing, reusing and moving buildings in what is now the United States for 3,000 years. The Pueblo, Hohokam, Woodland, Native Hawaiian and other peoples built and reused structures that are still standing today. Spanish missions and forts and a plethora of 17th century structures still stand thanks to continued maintenance long before the preservation movement arrived. In “The Color of Law,” author Richard Rothstein celebrates unsung preservation heroes: those who sustained cities through 50 years of Urban Renewal and suburban flight.⁸ Neighborhoods full of older and historic buildings survived thanks to those who used and maintained them, whether out of choice, necessity or both.⁹ This practice continues not only in urban areas, but in rural communities, as

⁷ As an act of self-determination and defiance, American Indians and Native Americans have taken these labels in order to redefine them in their own terms. This terminology is inscribed in United States law pertaining to the rights of sovereign tribal nations.

⁸ Rothstein, Richard. “The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America.” Liveright Publishing Corporation, New York, 2017.

⁹ In Chicago, one such unsung preservationists is finally getting the accolades he deserves: Bishop Louis Henry Ford. In 1941, Bishop Ford bought the 1836 Henry B. Clark House, believed to be the city’s oldest house. Bishop Ford and his wife, Margaret, began restoring the home in 1948 while they lived and held services in the home. The Fords owned the home when it became one of the city’s first local landmarks in 1970 and until the city purchased it from them in 1977. Despite owning the home for far longer than the original family, the Henry B. Clark House historic name stood. Its interpretation as a house museum gave little time to Bishop Ford’s legacy. That is, until recently when Pastor Kevin Anthony Ford, the bishop’s grandson, and architectural historian and preservation

well. Just look to the Rural Indexing Project that has documented the built environment in small cities across 25 states.¹⁰ This is preservation, too.

A recent Instagram post by @sylvanaquafarms points to further irony and injustice in attempts to tell the full American story.¹¹ The case in point was a former Southern plantation-turned museum claiming to have reinvented itself to ‘belong to everyone.’ However, the author points to the fact that the only narrative told about Black Americans at the site is about their enslavement. To paraphrase, it is as though Black history ended with slavery. The post went on to call attention to the museum’s \$300 million endowment. If the organization belonged to everyone, according to the author, these funds would be dedicated toward fighting for justice for Black Americans today. The author is telling the museum how it can, and should, be just and relevant.

Events at James Madison’s Montpelier further illustrate the gulf that can emerge between naming and fulfilling just intentions. In 2018, Montpelier hosted the National Summit on Teaching Slavery that resulted in the “Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites,” a best-practices rubric towards inclusion and justice in historic interpretation.¹² Structural parity was amongst the recommended best practices, including equal board representation by the descendant community. A year later, the Montpelier Descendants Committee (MDC) formed as “the nation’s first independent, descendant-led organization to be associated with a major historic site.”¹³ In 2020, the Montpelier Foundation officially recognized MDC as the sole representative organization of Montpelier’s descendant community and in 2021 voted to amend its bylaws to share equal authority with the MDC.^{14/15} Unfortunately, the relationship between the Montpelier Foundation and the MDC took an acrimonious turn and in March 2022, the Montpelier Foundation proposed amending its bylaws in order to both strip the MDC’s authority to name

activist, Elizabeth Blasius, led a successful campaign to propose renaming and reinterpreting the home, which we hope to happen yet in 2022.⁹

¹⁰ “What tiny towns in rural America can teach the cities about adaption.” All Things Considered, National Public Radio (NPR), June 21, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/21/1102040236/rural-america-photography-rural-indexing-project>. Rural Indexing Project, accessed on July 29, 2022 at <https://www.ruralindexingproject.com/>.

¹¹ Instagram Stories posts by @sylvanaquafarms on June 27, 2022. Information used with permission by @sylvanaquafarms, but the synopsis and interpretation are my own.

¹² “Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites: A Rubric of Best Practices Established by the National Summit on Teaching Slavery.” National Trust for Historic Preservation African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund. V1.0, October 25, 2018. Accessed on August 6, 2022. <https://montpelier-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/Interpreting%20Slavery%2010-30-18.pdf>

¹³ French, James. “Opinion: Can equality be realized at the home of the father of the Constitution?” The Washington Post, June 14, 2021. Accessed on August 6, 2022. https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:n_5EKDgukkEJ:https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/14/can-equality-be-realized-home-father-constitution/+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Schneider, Gregory S. “James Madison’s Montpelier strips power from enslaved descendant’s group.” The Washington Post, March 25, 2022. Accessed on August 6, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/03/25/james-madison-montpelier-enslaved-vote/>

its own board representatives. The proposed amendments would consolidate board composition power within the Foundation. The Foundation claimed that this would enable descendants who were not part of the MDC to serve, going against its own 2020 recognition of MDC as the sole representative. According to “The Washington Post,” Foundation chairman Gene Hickok said that “the board needs the authority to control its own membership.”¹⁶ James French, head of the MDC and a Foundation board member, described these proposed board changes as a reaction to the MDC’s push to strengthen a Foundation statement about George Floyd’s murder, which was never released for lack of agreement. French also noted Hickok’s proposal for a memorandum of understanding to govern the MDC’s interactions with the foundation, to which French responded that the committee’s legitimacy should be self-evident, “not a matter of regulatory debate.”¹⁷ National Trust for Historic Preservation president and CEO Paul Edmondson cast in stark language the Foundation’s actions as contrary to a just preservation movement: “the original commitment...’acknowledged the right of the descendant community to define itself, rather than to be defined by the Foundation. The newly proposed revision to the bylaws would do the opposite.” In May 2022, after months of public outcry, the Foundation voted in 11 new board members recommended by the MDC and Hickok announced his board resignation.¹⁸ The board’s proposed bylaw changes revealed their struggle and a lack of conviction for structural parity as they perceived a challenge to their power. Montpelier’s experience provides an example of one site’s journey toward justice, the challenge that governing bodies may have to achieve equality and that more tools, like accessible, affordable implicit bias and anti-racism training and implementation, are needed.

JUSTICE PREVENTS PRESERVATION FROM BECOMING A WEAPON

When only a small group of people know how to navigate preservation regulation, those who know it can use it as a weapon against those who are less familiar. A recent “ProPublica” article details how one cultural resource management firm manipulated its findings when threatened by their client.¹⁹ Gulf South Research Corporation was hired by Greenfield, an agricultural corporation, to conduct compliance work to acquire a Corps of Engineers permit to build a 54-silo grain elevator near Wallace, Louisiana on the Mississippi River. Gulf South’s architectural historian, Erin Edwards, recommended that the project would cause an adverse effect on historic resources, including those associated with enslaved people and the aftermath of slavery. Edwards’ supervisors changed her report to a recommendation of no adverse effect. We know this thanks to Edwards’ courage as a whistleblower. How many other manipulated findings go unreported? How many other communities have lost historic resources because of those who know how to game the system?

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Lukpat, Alyssa. “At Montpelier, Slaves’ Descendants Will Share Power With White Board Members.” The New York Times, May 16, 2022. Accessed on August 6, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/us/montpelier-estate-board-descendants-enslaved.html>

¹⁹ Freed Wessler, Seth. “She Warned the Grain Elevator Would Disrupt Sacred Black History. They Deleted Her Findings.” ProPublica, May 20, 2022. Accessed July 29, 2022. <https://www.propublica.org/article/louisiana-enslaved-grave-sites>

Preservation has also been used to prevent additions and alterations along aesthetic lines even when those changes may respond to needs provided for by law. In one mid-sized city, a local community organization is utilizing preservation to prevent adding accessory dwelling units (ADU) in an historic district, citing the threat to the district's character. This is despite the city approving and pushing for ADU construction in a community where it takes four average wage earners to afford a one-bedroom apartment. Another local community association sued to prevent the construction of a garage at a locally designated home, despite the Historic Preservation Commission staff awarding the permit. The garage, which is on the home's rear façade, but faces another primary street, would accommodate accessibility needs for a person who uses a wheelchair. Community members openly stated that the person should have moved to a neighborhood more conducive to their needs and that the garage 'looks just horrible.' The owner successfully countersued in federal court under the Fair Housing Act.

PRESERVING HISTORY'S LAYERS

One of the most humbling, breathtaking sights that I have ever seen is the giant sequoia, the world's largest and oldest living organism. The growth rings of its 30-foot trunk, each building strength with and over the others, are a living archive of 3,000 years of environmental change. We would never look at a giant sequoia and evaluate which layer is most significant. While each layer tells a unique story, these magnificent, historic trees are the sum of their layered parts.

Distinguishing a period of significance is like removing outer layers of bark, killing the tree to reveal its heartwood. Historic places are the sum of their layered stories. Is there a layer that is most significant? This implies that the people and their stories before and after the period of significance are less important. Is this a fair practice? Does it have to be either/or? With this practice we become judge and jury about what has value.

Can we really restore something to its period of significance? Restoration only simulates the feeling of a place and time. Restoration is a re-creation that erases the integrity that the current conditions represent. Aren't we actually making a place inauthentic when we swap current conditions for new materials trying to look historic? Does a place have to look exactly the same for someone to experience its history? Even worse, we cannot reverse the removal of layers of history. There needs to be another way that doesn't pick historic winners and losers. We are interpreters – we must learn to tell the story without removing some of the layers.

This argument is complicated, fraught with unintended consequences and an inconvenient truth. We see the power that restored (recreated) places have to inspire people. What happens to preservation if we stop trying to re-create history that tells only one part of the story?

FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

To be relevant, we must do more than tackle injustice in our own movement. We need to help dismantle injustice wherever it lives in our communities and touches our work. Tackling inequity requires an understanding of the root causes of outcome disparities within our society, especially when the disparity is about failing to tell a complete and living story about ongoing

injustices that have deep historic roots. Places can be a part of the solution, as I'll cover in future blog posts.

“Justice is a part of healthy communities.”

Katherine Malone-France
Chief Preservation Officer
National Trust for Historic Preservation
Washington, D.C., February 21, 2020

YOUR INPUT IS VITAL

Your thoughts on this and forthcoming topics are not only welcomed, they're imperative to ensuring this project is inclusive, with well-considered outcomes. So post away on Landmarks Illinois' [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) feeds and my [LinkedIn](#) page (blog comments are not enabled)! I'll collect and consider your comments to inform future blog posts and the project's outcomes published in the forthcoming Relevancy Guidebook to the U.S. Preservation Movement (working title).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Should the preservation movement prioritize equity above equality?
- Where do you see a lack of fairness in your community? Are there any tangible places that you associate with this situation?
- Do you connect preservation and justice? How so, or why not?
- Have you seen preservation used as a weapon against or for something in your community? Who was benefiting and why? Who was not?
- Are preservationists responsible for supporting justice? In what way?
- What are other ways that preservation practice can be more fair to everyone? Does it need to be?

STAY TUNED FOR BLOG POST #7: SUPPORTING HOUSING ACCESS

FURTHER READING

- Avrami, Erica, Editor. "Preservation and Social Inclusion." Issues in Preservation Policy. Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2020. <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/books/catalog/503-preservation-and-social-inclusion>
- "Design for the Just City." The Just City Lab @ Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Accessed on July 24, 2022. <https://www.designforthejustcity.org/>. Includes the "Just City Index," a prompt for community discussion about collective values and indicators of what a community stands for.
- "Just." A Program of the International Living Future Institute. <https://living-future.org/just/basics/>. The Just Program is an assessment tool and scorecard to evaluate an organization's support for social justice.

- Rubin, Rebekkah. "In Hudson, Ohio, Whose History Matters?" Belt Magazine, June 8, 2021. Accessed August 7, 2022. <https://tinyurl.com/2p97485w>
- Sperber, Esther. "Architectural Ethics: Is Your Building Immoral?" Architizer, undated. Accessed August 7, 2022. <https://architizer.com/blog/inspiration/industry/is-your-building-immoral/>