

# A Preservation PRIMER



by DYLAN PEACOCK  
Senior Preservation  
Services Manager

## Strategies and policies anyone can use to save historic buildings

Anyone can do preservation in their community, but how do you know where to begin? With so many different terms to grapple with—National Register, National Historic Landmark, Local Historic District, Preservation Restriction—it can sometimes feel like you need a master’s degree in historic preservation to decipher the terminology.

These terms are tools that can help accomplish specific preservation goals. Let’s demystify some of them to understand their benefits and limits so you can start preserving buildings in your community, perhaps even your own house.

### **National Register of Historic Places**

Also simply known as the **National Register**, this is the term you are most likely to come across

with approximately 1.8 million listings throughout the country. This is the nation’s official list of cultural resources that have been deemed significant in some way—be it historical, architectural, or archaeological.

Some historic properties are significant enough to be listed on their own, while others are listed collectively as part of a **Historic District**; they derive their significance as part of the collective of historic resources. Roughly 3 percent of National Register listings are considered to have such outstanding national significance that they have been separately designated as **National Historic Landmarks**.

Anyone can nominate a property to the National Register, but there is often confusion about what that means for making changes to a property in the future. Will you be

in trouble if you pick the wrong shade of white for your Greek Revival house? Unless there is some other local regulation in place, the answer is no. Despite popular misconceptions, the National Register listing is voluntary and honorary. Listing does not result in regulation of changes made by private owners, though it can offer some limited protection from public projects with government funding and licensing. Also, National Register listing opens potential funding opportunities in some cases, such as federal historic preservation tax credits.

If the National Register is not a local regulatory tool, what does it do? The National Register is foremost a great planning tool, forming part of a nationwide effort to coordinate the identification and evaluation of historic resources to aid in their protection. This helps

communities manage development and change in ways that reduce adverse impacts to historic resources. For instance, it may factor into decisions to demolish a historic school building or a decision to demolish historic structures to build a highway on-ramp. Reading a National Register nomination form can also help homeowners figure out what is significant about their property before making changes that might impact important character-defining features.

### Local Historic Districts

This is a local planning tool that regulates changes to the built environment in areas of a community that retain a high degree of historic fabric. Wait, didn't I just say that the National Register doesn't regulate changes to private property?

Local Historic Districts (LHD) are often confused with National Register Historic Districts (NRHD) but the two are not the same. While both districts can exist in the same place with overlapping boundaries, they can also exist completely independent of one another. An LHD is a local zoning overlay, legally unrelated to the federally administered National Register.

However, if your house is in a LHD, you probably won't have to face having your paint colors regulated. While some districts do regulate paint color as an important part of the district's character, the overwhelming majority do not. Since

the regulations for each LHD are locally established, they can vary from community to community, though most districts have adopted design guidelines based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

With the caveat that each LHD is unique, they can accomplish a range of things including denying demolition, sometimes regulating changes to exteriors, and ensuring that additions and new construction are compatible with the size and scale of surrounding buildings. Protection is usually limited to what is visible from the public right-of-way, so it usually does not include the rear of a property and almost never includes interiors. Additionally, establishing a historic district follows a public process and can take a significant amount of time, advocacy, and determination to create.

### Preservation Easements

What if you want to protect more than just what is visible from the public right-of-way? What if, despite the odds, your house has remarkably intact historic interiors? In some of the hottest property markets in New England, it is not unusual to see dumpsters filled with historic doors, floorboards, and fireplace surrounds—even in historic districts—as gut renovations erase any trace of the past.

Historic New England holds more than 100 preservation easements in the region through our Preservation Easement Program from Stamford, Connecticut, to Caribou, Maine. These are private legal agreements granting the easement holder—a qualified nonprofit organization or governmental entity—the right to regulate certain changes to historic properties. These agreements are recorded with the land records

**PAGE 18** The mid-eighteenth-century plaster, woodwork, and hardware at this Connecticut house is protected by an easement. **RIGHT** Boston's Beacon Hill Architectural District was established in 1955 and expanded in 1958 and 1963. It is one of the oldest local historic districts in the country.







The owners of this easement property opted for a more sedate color scheme in the stairhall. Changing paint and wallpaper can radically transform a space without removing or altering historic fabric.

and are binding on future owners, donating certain rights to the easement holder in order to protect the property's historic character in perpetuity. In Massachusetts, where preservation easements are officially known as "preservation restrictions," there is the added requirement of obtaining local- and state-level approval for the protection to be perpetual.

Easements can accomplish a wide range of preservation goals and can be tailored specifically to the needs of the historic property. At their most basic, they can prohibit demolition and demolition-by-neglect and require changes

and repairs to exterior features to be reviewed by the easement holder. More broadly, they can also protect outbuildings, landscape features (such as historic fences and stone walls), and a variety of interior features—paneling, floors, plaster, moldings, framing, decorative murals, historic door hardware, and a host of others. Remember though, it is important to retain enough flexibility for future owners so that the building remains adaptable to changing living needs and owners can make reasonable aesthetic alterations that don't irreversibly harm protected features. Painting woodwork or hanging new

wallpaper won't necessarily harm historic fabric, but they will allow future owners to customize their residences.

A preservation easement must be well crafted with clear language defining the scope of protections, legal procedures, and documentation of existing conditions. It also needs to have teeth—a restriction isn't much use if it can't be enforced. When a violation occurs, the easement empowers the holder to take legal action to enforce compliance. However, with regular monitoring and good communication, preservation easements can help

partner a property owner with experienced preservation staff to provide technical guidance and information. Ultimately, both have a mutual interest in ensuring that the property remains in good repair and that the unique features that give the property its historic character are preserved. Well executed and effectively managed, a preservation easement can be one of the most comprehensive and powerful tools to protect a historic property.

### **What You Can Do**

What are the preservation needs in your community? Does your town need widespread identification of historic resources to help with advocacy and planning? Is there a specific historic neighborhood that has faced insensitive development pressure? Are you a homeowner

concerned about whether future owners will retain the unique character of your old home?

The key takeaway here is that anyone can do preservation in their community. Preservation includes identifying historic resources that need to be saved, organizing and building support, and connecting with local officials and decision makers to enhance regulations and advocate for funding.

Once you've identified what needs saving, you can go on to define your goals. Understanding what success looks like will help you choose which tools will best achieve your preservation goals. If you feel passionate about a place, you can start building the momentum to save it. 🛠️

## **A Preservation Resources Toolkit**

### **National Park Service**

- [nps.gov/index.htm](https://nps.gov/index.htm)
- National Register of Historic Places (NRHP): [nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/what-is-the-national-register.htm](https://nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/what-is-the-national-register.htm)
- National Historic Landmark (NHL): [nps.gov/subjects/nationalhistoriclandmarks/index.htm](https://nps.gov/subjects/nationalhistoriclandmarks/index.htm)
- Technical Preservation Services: [nps.gov/tps/index.htm](https://nps.gov/tps/index.htm), [nps.gov/tps/education/workingonthepast/guardian.htm](https://nps.gov/tps/education/workingonthepast/guardian.htm)

### **National Trust for Historic Preservation**

- [savingplaces.org/](https://savingplaces.org/)

### **Preservation Easements**

- Historic New England's Preservation Easements: [historicnewengland.org/preservation/for-homeowners-communities/preservation-easement-program/](https://historicnewengland.org/preservation/for-homeowners-communities/preservation-easement-program/)

### **New England Preservation**

#### **Connecticut**

- State Historic Preservation Office: [portal.ct.gov/DECD/Services/Historic-Preservation](https://portal.ct.gov/DECD/Services/Historic-Preservation)
- Preservation Connecticut: [preservationct.org/](https://preservationct.org/)

#### **Maine**

- Historic Preservation Commission: [maine.gov/mhpc/home](https://maine.gov/mhpc/home)
- Maine Preservation: [mainepreservation.org/](https://mainepreservation.org/)

#### **Massachusetts**

- Massachusetts Historical Commission: [sec.state.ma.us/mhc/](https://sec.state.ma.us/mhc/)
- Preservation Mass: [preservationmass.org/](https://preservationmass.org/)

#### **New Hampshire**

- New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources: [nh.gov/nhdhr/](https://nh.gov/nhdhr/)
- New Hampshire Preservation Alliance: [nhpreservation.org/](https://nhpreservation.org/)

#### **Rhode Island**

- Rhode Island Historic Preservation & Heritage Commission: [preservation.ri.gov/](https://preservation.ri.gov/)
- Preserve Rhode Island: [preserveri.org/](https://preserveri.org/)

#### **Vermont**

- Vermont State Historic Preservation Office: [accd.vermont.gov/historic-preservation](https://accd.vermont.gov/historic-preservation)
- Preservation Trust of Vermont: [ptvermont.org/](https://ptvermont.org/)