

Why Preserve?

The Connection Between Emotion & Logic in Historic Preservation

November 2025, Aly Ramage



1886 Victorian Building in Minden, Nebraska

Introduction

Historic preservation is a conversation with our past about our future. It provides us with opportunities to ask, "What is important in our history?" and "What parts of our past can we preserve for the future?" Through historic preservation, we look at history in different ways, ask different questions of the past, and learn new things about our history and ourselves. Historic preservation is an important way for us to transmit our understanding of the past to future generations.¹

- Definition from the National Parks Service

¹ National Park Service. "What Is Historic Preservation?" Last modified March 14, 2024. U.S. Department of the Interior. Accessed October 31, 2025.

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/historicpreservation/what-is-historic-preservation.htm>.

Why is historic preservation important? Why should we do it when it seems easier to tear down and rebuild? What benefit does it truly provide?

It often seems that the answers to these questions lie within personal beliefs and aesthetic preferences rather than the cold-hard facts. As an individual who works in the field of historic preservation, the beauty behind historic buildings is enough for me to believe in the effort. As a facts and figures minded person, the purpose of this research is to present the “why” behind historic preservation through both the emotional realm and the rational facts, figures, and results.

In the past, preservation was known for being “curatorial and memorial.” It has since developed to include financial benefits, sustainability, tourism and culture, and economic development.²

Pathos

Emotional Connection

Speaking matter of factly, Randall Mason in their writing defines our reasoning for preservation as an emotional connection between memory and the environment, creating a sense of awe regarding old structures. It's this connection that makes historic preservation quite romantic. People gravitate to historic buildings and districts because of their beauty in their often immaculate details and stories that are held within. Sometimes the story is that “my great-great grandfather built this shop 100 years ago” or even, “Martin Luther King wrote his ‘I have a dream’ speech in this hotel.” In either case, it is evident that a place's history can have an impact on people, sometimes, an entire country.

Oftentimes, communities capitalize on the emotional connection to history and old buildings through tourism and culture, sometimes known as heritage tourism. This is primarily done through historic district designations. Similar to a museum holding different stories of the past, community leaders can harness their history and tell their story within their commercial district.

One excellent example is from Red Cloud, Nebraska, where on their website it states:

“Red Cloud, Nebraska is not just a destination—it's a place where literature and culture merge with the pleasures of a quiet country town and its prairie surroundings. To visit Red Cloud is to experience a town and entire landscapes, largely unchanged, as world-famous author Willa Cather knew them as a young girl and throughout her life. Red Cloud is an oasis on the prairie.”

In this instance, their community reflects on the impact of local author, Willa-Cather.³

² Mason, Randall. “Theoretical and Practical Arguments for Values-Centered Preservation.” *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* 3, no. 2 (2006): 21–48.

³ Red Cloud Heritage Tourism Development. *Red Cloud, Nebraska — Great Stories Grow Here*. Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://www.visitredcloud.com/>.

Preservation might also capture a culture's identity within an area like in the town of Thomasville, Georgia. The Bottom was the heart of the African American Community, as segregation in the early 20th century limited establishments that black residents could visit. Through integration, black residents were able to visit more businesses, however, reduced foot traffic in The Bottom, eventually leading to the decline in local business.

Community leaders, such as the Thomasville Center for the Arts, worked to revive the area through major initiatives in order to preserve the culture that once existed. They had three primary projects that had the goal of bringing people into the community. They also worked with a local historian to capture and tell the story of The Bottom. Through this, they were able to attract more people and promote new businesses. One business owner stated that, "the rich history and sense of community appealed to her". By telling the story of The Bottom, the community is now bustling with new businesses and cultural events. ⁴

While historic preservation is romantic, emotional, and beautiful, it can also appeal to a more rational-minded individual. The story of The Bottom is just one example of a community that utilized the emotional nature of preservation to improve the local economy.

Logos

Logical Reasoning

Donovan Rypkema discusses the economics side of preservation. In the author's research, they found that historic preservation created more jobs, one way being through construction efforts. Rehabilitation efforts require a more diverse skillset of workers, allowing for more jobs on a singular project, even more than a new-build project. Preservation was also found to create new businesses and jobs, private investment, tourism, increased property values as well as property and sales tax, dilute poverty, and increase community pride.

Historic preservation is also sustainable. The greenest building is the one already standing. In instances other than complete disrepair and environmental hazards, renovations of already standing buildings are more economically sustainable. When factoring in demolition costs, renovations are often cheaper than new construction. Finally, standards in the field of historic design result in a higher building quality compared to a new construction.

In Rypkema's research, it was found that preservation is effective in communities of all sizes. The most consistently effective model is the Main Street Four-Point Approach. Main Street, founded by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, focuses on economic development

⁴ Marta Olmos. "Main Spotlight: Community Preservation in a Historically African-American Georgia Community." *Main Street America*, April 5 2022.

<https://www.mainstreet.org/the-latest/news/main-spotlight-community-preservation-in-a-historically-african-american-georgia-community>.

through Design (most often historic preservation), Economic Vitality, Organization, and Promotion. The Main Street movement is national, with state programs in nearly all 50 states.⁵

In 2024 alone, Main Street communities reinvested \$7.65 Billion, had a net gain of 33,835 jobs, 6,324 businesses, and an overall rate of \$21.73 reinvested for every \$1 invested. In addition, 10,126 buildings have been rehabbed, and 1.9 million volunteer hours have been logged. “Since 1980, the Main Street Movement has resulted in \$115.27 billion reinvested locally, 181,647 net new businesses, 815,894 net gain in jobs, 345,801 buildings rehabbed, and 37.3 million volunteer hours.”⁶ These statistics help demonstrate that rehabilitation projects impact the economy by promoting local investment.

Since the Nebraska Main Street Network’s founding in 1994, there have been 2,660 design projects, with over \$46.7 Million in both public and private reinvestment⁷. While this investment also funds initiatives within the other three points (Economic Vitality, Promotion, and Organization) the most costly projects often occur within Design.

Fremont, Nebraska, a Nebraska Main Street Network Community, highlights the positive impact of Main Street and historic preservation on their economy through their website:

“We are immensely proud of our historic downtown business district, which spans Main Street and a few blocks beyond, and are thrilled to see a growing number of customers from outside city limits discovering what Fremont has to offer. At the same time, we’re working hard to retain the area’s small-town sense of community and quaint charm.

Known as Eastern Nebraska’s Antique Capital, Fremont’s historic downtown features several large and eclectic shops, all in close proximity. And along the picturesque downtown streets you can find specialty boutiques, coffee shops and to-die-for dining and desserts at one of several restaurants and bakeries.

Come spend some time in Historic Downtown Fremont and find out what midwestern charm is all about!”⁸

⁵ Rypkema, Donovan D. *The Economics of Historic Preservation: A Community Leader’s Guide*. Rev. ed. Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2005.

⁶ National Main Street Center. “Collective Impact: Reinvesting in the Social, Civic, and Economic Fabric of Historic Downtown and Neighborhood Commercial Corridors.” *Main Street America*. Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://www.mainstreet.org/our-network/collective-impact>.

⁷ Nebraska Main Street Network. “Statistics on Improvements.” Accessed November 3, 2025. https://nebraskamainstreet.org/about/who-we-are/economic_impact.html.

⁸ “About – Historic Downtown Fremont.” *Historic Downtown Fremont*. Accessed October 31 2025. <https://historicdowntownfremont.com/about/>.

Funding and Resources

While the funding portion of preservation might seem daunting, financing options exist. This financing happens through the Historic Preservation Fund and Historic Tax Credits (both Federal & State). In Nebraska, the Valuation Incentive Program funds residential restoration projects. Understanding tax credits can be complex, however, the State Historic Preservation Office will work to educate property owners and get their project funded.

There are a variety of organizations at the federal, state, and local level that support preservation efforts. Some include the National Parks Service, National Trust for Historic Preservation, State Historic Preservation Offices, and Main Street.

Conclusion

On its face, historic preservation seems to only revolve around beautification and personal preference, however, it extends beyond aesthetics. The relationship between our emotional connection and the economic outcomes of historic preservation are unmatched compared to new construction.

It is because of this that we continue to invest the time, effort, and dollars to preserve. Not only are we saving old buildings, we are creating opportunities for heritage tourism, businesses, jobs, volunteerism, community leadership and pride, economic growth, and so much more.

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