



The Northeastern Historic Preservation Trades Workforce: Implications for Tourism

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Many tourism destinations in the Northeast United States are well known for their historic districts and historic main street areas. Historic buildings create charming and intriguing settings for lodging, dining, museums, and other visitor amenities. Such districts and buildings can be key attractions for visitors, setting certain destinations apart from others and creating unique visitor experiences that connect the present day to the history and heritage of the destination (Tresidder & Deakin, 2019). Historic preservation, commonly defined as the process of identifying, protecting, and enhancing buildings, places, and objects of historical and cultural significance, is noted to offer people “a conversation with our past about our future” (National Park Service, 2021, n.p.). Historic preservation initiatives can be critical for ensuring that older buildings are saved from redevelopment and that property owners and managers understand how to protect and maintain their structures. Historic preservation and heritage tourism are often closely interlinked efforts (Ryberg-Webster & Kinahan, 2014). Historic buildings require significant upkeep and specialized knowledge to keep them looking and performing their best. Some tradespeople – such as masons, carpenters, and plasterers – specialize in preservation or restoration work for older buildings, allowing historic buildings to be maintained and restored using historically-sensitive methods and tried-and-true best practices.

In recent years, workforce shortages and concerns have been well-documented in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Goh & Okumus, 2020; Johnson, 2020), especially following the workforce shifts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Baum et al., 2020). The preservation trades workforce, too, is currently experiencing substantial shortages in the Northeast region, as has been widely noted by preservation nonprofits, property owners, and employers. While these trades professionals are not typically viewed as working within the tourism industry, the success and popularity of tourism in many destinations depend upon their specialized knowledge and availability. With this in mind, it is important for destination marketing and management organizations, chamber associations, and tourism businesses and stakeholders to understand the status of the preservation trades workforce and the implications of its shortages upon destination communities.

Toward understanding the reasons behind current workforce challenges and identifying possible solutions pertaining to recruitment and training, the research team designed a qualitative-focused, multiple-methods approach of inquiry. This process began with an online survey (n=264 respondents) followed by key informant interviews (12 participants) and focus groups (10 participants) with tradespeople, educators, and others engaged in preservation, focusing on the Northeast region of the United States (delimited to New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine). Through these interactions, the researchers sought to learn about educational pathways, recruitment initiatives, diversity and inclusion, and opportunities to enhance the ongoing professional experiences of these career paths. With the overall goals of generating information and recommendations for four statewide preservation nonprofits in the four-state Northeast region, this study aimed to build upon other recently generated preservation trades knowledge, such as labor studies from research group PlaceEconomics for the Campaign for Historic Trades (2022) and City of Covington, Kentucky (2022).

This research revealed broad perceptions of shortages in a wide range of preservation trades specializations, with the most extreme shortages reported for plastering, masonry, carpentry,

materials conservation, and decorative finishes. Both the survey and interview findings indicated the importance of personal interests and connections to history and historic buildings in generating interest for preservation trades careers. Notably, eighty-three percent of tradespeople survey respondents stated that “personal appreciation for historic buildings and desire to play a role in preservation” contributed to why they chose to pursue their career in the preservation trades.

Travel and tourism experiences can help to foster such interest and awareness through education, access, and immersion in historic places. Research findings emphasize the importance of field trips and hands-on interactions with historic sites and trades activities, especially for youth, in generating knowledge and excitement for preservation trades careers. Many participants noted that museums and other publicly-accessible historic buildings can serve in valuable roles as active classrooms for all ages and different levels and types of interest. As some examples, the following statements from research participants suggest some ways that this might happen:

“I would encourage learning institutions to expose historic buildings and sites to their students via field trips and museum visits. As a docent in an art museum concentrating on material of the 18th and 19th centuries, I found that the 4th graders we worked with could become quite engaged with the decorative arts, painting, sculpture, furniture, architecture etc.”

“I think historic museums and/or preservation institutions should have an ongoing guild/apprentice program taught by their master restoration carpenters and/or offer classes to the public.”

Participants noted that many of the better-known existing training opportunities for trade and craft skill development are offered via institutions and agencies that aim to connect visitors to regional history, such as the National Park Service, art and history museums, and historic sites. Whether directly or indirectly, many trades training opportunities already have strong linkages to the tourism industry, and there are many opportunities to expand upon these connections. Findings collectively emphasize that in order to build and strengthen the preservation trades workforce, cross-sector collaborations and partnerships are essential.

The tourism industry’s role in generating excitement about historic towns and attractions in the region can have broad-reaching community and cultural sustainability impacts. While participants in this regional study noted that the Northeast United States is particularly rich in historical and cultural resources in terms of its built environment, this research offers implications and recommendations relevant to a variety of geographies. In sum, there is a large body of evidence that tourism actors such as historic sites and attractions, historic lodging, and destination management organizations can play vital roles in fostering interest in historic preservation and related careers. There is much potential for such tourism actors to more explicitly and intentionally become engaged in the preservation trades movement through educational partnerships and program development. This engagement, in turn, will benefit the long-term sustainability of notable buildings and sites and the enduring appeal of historic destinations, all which are critical for the success of tourism.

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Acknowledgments

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