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# Common Myths About Historic Buildings

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Many myths and bits of misinformation about historic houses and buildings are widely repeated and believed. Fortunately, as more people undertake rehabilitation and restoration projects, the myths are being dispelled. If you are thinking about buying an older house or building, you will want to know the truth about ownership and renovation of a historic structure. Some of the most common myths you might encounter are discussed below.

## Myth #1: Restoring an older building costs more than new construction.

**Fact:** Although each rehabilitation project is different, it is typically more cost-effective to restore an older building than to pay for new construction. Upgrading an older commercial building or house is usually less expensive than demolition plus construction of a comparable new building. Older buildings contain materials that are long-lasting and can be retrofitted to be more energy efficient. Also, your rehabilitation project may be able to benefit from a 25% state historic preservation tax credit for residential properties or a 20% federal tax credit for income-producing properties.



Columbia County. Repainting a historic house exterior is an eligible expense for the homeowner's income tax credit program. Source: WHS - State Historic Preservation Office.

## Myth #2: If my property is designated "historic," I won't be able to make any changes to it and I will have to open it for tours.

**Fact:** Even if your house or building is in a locally designated historic district, you will be able to make significant changes to your property. Historic district zoning only regulates renovations that are readily visible from the street, and local design review generally allows flexibility for making rear additions to a structure. Historic zoning also does not impose any regulations on the design and use of a building's interior. It is only if you receive tax credits or some type of grant for your rehabilitation efforts that your interior work would be subject to review and approval. Also, there is no law that will require you to open your house or building for tours, regardless of its listing on either the National Register of Historic Places or a local district designation.



Once a building is listed on the National Register, the owner can order a plaque to be installed on the building. In some instances, communities have their own plaques for local designation also. Source: WHS - State Historic Preservation Office.

## Myth #3: Historic designation will lower my property values.

**Fact:** Over 30 studies across the country have clearly demonstrated that historic designation and the creation of historic districts actually increases

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### Have Questions?

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property values. Historic designation gives a distinction to a neighborhood or an individual historic site that sets it apart from other properties. Historic homes and buildings can be marketed to buyers who are seeking the quality and character of these historic structures. The National Register recognizes the significance of a property or district, and local historic districts protect property owners from inappropriate new development or misguided [remodeling](#). These historic designations will protect your investment and improve your property and resale values.

**Myth #4: If my property is listed on the National Register, it will be protected forever and can never be demolished.**

**Fact:** You may have heard that a property listed on the National Register can never be demolished or altered, and that the government will step in and protect any threatened property. In fact, no such protection exists in federal or state laws. Property owners can do whatever they wish with their property according to their local zoning laws. The only way your use of a property could be affected by government intervention is with a federal or state government undertaking. Under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, all federally funded, licensed or assisted projects — such as improvements to a federal highway or installation of cellular communication towers — must be reviewed by the [State Historic Preservation Officer \(SHPO\)](#). The SHPO will consider any possible adverse effects on historic resources and propose mitigation efforts. However, the government (state or federal) has no such authority if a private individual or company, a city or a county wishes to demolish or alter a National Register-listed property.



Historic buildings can retain details not found on their contemporary counterparts. These unique details contribute to higher property values.

**Myth #5: Government money is available to help me repair and preserve my house.**

**Fact:** The amount of money available to help you rehabilitate a historic house or building through direct grants or foundations is very limited. Many of the available grants also require a financial or other type of material commitment from the property owner. If you undertake a substantial rehabilitation of your property, you can get financial assistance from the government in the form of [tax credits](#). If you want to rehabilitate your historic house, you may be approved for a state 25% tax credit for rehabilitation if you spend more than \$10,000 over a two-year period. If you want to rehabilitate your income-producing property, such as a downtown commercial building, you may be eligible for the 20% federal tax credit and/or the 20% state tax credit for your qualified costs. Both of these programs require review by the SHPO, which is responsible for ensuring that the work you do is in keeping with the character of your house or building.

**Myth #6: Historic preservation is only for fancy and expensive homes. There is nothing special about my property or street.**

**Fact:** Historic preservation applies to properties far beyond just the [high style](#) homes of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Historic preservation is a significant part of community planning decisions and quality of life issues. Older neighborhoods with modest architecture often have a particular character and historical importance in the development of a community. Every neighborhood and downtown area has a different story to tell, and these stories are expressed in the houses and buildings along the streets.



Montreal, Wisconsin. The Montreal Company built houses for its workers, some of which are seen in this photo and are now listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Source: Photographer Mark Fay

**Myth #7: My property rights will be restricted if my building is designated as historic.**

**Fact:** The intention of historic preservation standards and laws is to protect your property rights, not take them away. Your community's zoning code will help to maintain and enhance property values in designated historic districts. If you own a historic house or building or a property in a historic district, you can count on your local [design review](#) process to help

preserve the historic character of your neighborhood or downtown. This preservation of historic character will enhance everyone's property and resale values. Without historic district zoning, your neighbor could build or remodel in such a way as to detract from the area's historic character and negatively affect your property.

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