



CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how “We the People” interact with the government and each other. Let’s help each other expand our civic literacy.



In 1966, Congress passed the [National Historic Preservation Act](#) (NHPA) to address the growing concern that many of America’s historic places were being lost due to development and modernization. The law established a national policy to preserve buildings, sites, and objects that reflect the country’s heritage and cultural identity.

The [NHPA](#) created several important tools and institutions to support preservation efforts. One of the most visible is the [National Register of Historic Places](#), a federal list of properties deemed significant at the local, state, or national level. To help manage preservation efforts nationwide, the law also established State Historic Preservation Office (SHPOs), which work with communities

to identify and protect historic resources. At the federal level, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) was created to guide agencies in making decisions that consider the impact on historic properties.

A key part of the NHPA is [Section 106](#), which requires federal agencies to consider how their projects might affect historic properties. This applies to any undertaking that receives federal funding, permits, or licenses. Before moving forward, agencies must consult with preservation experts and the public to evaluate potential impacts and explore alternatives. This process does not automatically stop a project, but it ensures that preservation is incorporated into decision-making.

The NHPA also includes exemptions for certain federal buildings. Under [Section 107](#), properties such as the [White House](#), the [U.S. Capitol](#), and the [Supreme Court](#) are not subject to the [Section 106](#) review process. This means that changes to these buildings do not require consultation with preservation authorities, even if they are historically significant. The law assumes that these buildings are already under careful stewardship, though the exemption has sparked public discussion about the balance between tradition and transparency.

In 2025, the White House exemption became a national topic of attention when plans were announced to demolish the East Wing to make way for a new structure. While the decision generated public interest and debate, it was legally permitted under the NHPA. Because the White House is exempt from [Section 106](#), the project did not require review by the ACHP or SHPO. Additionally, the [National Capital Planning Commission](#) (NCPC), which typically reviews federal construction projects in Washington, D.C., was not involved in the demolition phase due to jurisdictional limitations.



This event highlighted how the NHPA’s exemptions can affect public oversight of changes to historically significant federal properties. While many preservation efforts rely on collaboration and voluntary review, the law does not mandate it in all cases. As a result, some have called for updates to the NHPA to ensure that even the most iconic buildings are considered within the broader preservation framework.

To Think and To Do: The NHPA has helped protect thousands of historic places across the United States. It encourages civic engagement, public dialogue, and respect for the past. Understanding how the law works and where it does not apply helps citizens think critically about how we preserve our shared history. Given your understanding, how can civic participation influence preservation policy? Explain.

