During the 17th and 18th centuries, European preservation societies were restricted to aristocrats or wealthy individuals who shared an interest in antiquity, and could afford the high costs of travel to visit ancient sites and monuments along the well-established itinerary known as the Grand Tour. Rarely did these societies finance preservation projects, even if some of their members did so privately. Preservation was considered one among the many interests of reputable upper class European men, a respectable way to make charitable contributions to society, but certainly not a career. Amateurism was a point of pride, as is made evident in the name of the Society of Dilettanti (est. 1734). By the mid 19th century, as steamships and railroads made travel affordable to an emergent middle class, more inclusive preservation societies began to emerge throughout the Western world with the explicit aim to professionalize the field. France led the way with the Commission of Historic Monuments (est. 1837), which was charged from the outset with educating preservation architects, and certifying their ability to work on national monuments. Professionalization involved a concerted effort to elevate the standards of preservation practice through education, institutionalization, regulation and advocacy. Significantly, European colonies became the testing ground for new preservation protocols and institutions, such as the Archeological Survey of India (est. 1860), or the Colonial Bureau of Fine Arts in Morocco (est. 1912). In the United States, a number of private societies and government institutions contributed to the early formation of preservation as a profession, most notably the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (est. 1889), the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (1910), and the National Park Service (est. 1916). According to Burton J. Bledstein, emeritus professor of history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, professionalization especially defined the culture of the United States during the late 19th century. Almost every field of practice was professionalized then, from medicine and jurisprudence, to engineering, architecture, and preservation. The word “amateurish” began to take on negative connotations, and to signify superficiality and incompetence. Professionals, argued Bledstein, tried to assert their authority by playing up the dangerous complexity of problems befalling the modern world, and positioning themselves as having the unique knowledge to solve them. They portrayed modernity in a perpetual state of crisis. Preservationists tended to present modernization as posing a constant threat to humanity’s heritage, which could only they could save. For Bledstein, the professionalization of preservation mirrored and served the broader cultural needs of emergent middle-class professionals to edit their past in order to distance themselves from it, and to appear more prosperous than they perhaps were.

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