When the US literary historian Van Wyck Brooks (1886-1963) coined the idea of a usable past, Colonial Revival was the fashionable style to build in America, and Colonial era buildings gripped the attention of preservationists. Brooks showed that our investment in one moment of the past, and not another, reveals more about ourselves than it does about history. The notion of a usable past encouraged the sense that to invest in particular historical moments served the pragmatic purpose of creating cultural identity, not just of nations vis-à-vis foreign countries, but also of élite classes and even affinity groups wishing to segregate themselves from other sections of society. Brooks was a member of the United States’ WASP élite, and he spent his life attempting to define America's cultural character in self-serving terms. In 1908, a year after graduating from Harvard College, he published *The Wine of the Puritans*, in which he defined American identity in terms of a protestant religious idealism and materialist practicality. The usable past, applied to American literary history, was an effort to forge a native canon that could be cultivated as tradition and drawn on by artists aspiring to serious merit. His works—including a five-volume series on U.S. literature from 1815 to 1915, *Finders and Makers* (1936-1952), and biographies of writers including Mark Twain and Ralph Waldo Emerson—are credited with establishing the lasting importance of many of the U.S.'s now best-known 19th-century authors.

It was precisely during this period between the 1900s and the 1930s that American preservationists forged their canon of monuments. The 1906 US Antiquities Act enabled President Theodore Roosevelt to unilaterally declare National Monuments. He chose wildlife areas and Amerindian archeological sites, not colonial buildings, much to the dissatisfaction of élites. Private wealth stepped in to redress the situation: J.D. Rockefeller started investing heavily in the preservation of Colonial Williamsburg in the 1920s; the Metropolitan Museum of Art began collecting Colonial period rooms during the same period; and William Sumner Appleton and fellow Boston Brahmins in the newly formed Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities decided to restore colonial era houses, such as that of the revolutionary hero Paul Revere, which they had to vacate of Italian immigrants. Indeed the massive waves of immigrants that arrived in the US prompted the uneven investment of élites in the colonial past, with the dual purpose of asserting their cultural dominance and aiding assimilation. Similar uses of the past emerged in other American countries that felt overwhelmed by immigration in the early twentieth century, notably in Argentina and Brazil. Brook’s usable past enabled the rise of preservation in the twentieth century as a self-conscious cultural and political instrument of modernization. Today, it places pressure on the need to remain watchful and to critically evaluate the changing cultural politics of preservation.

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