Preservation conference to explore local history

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HIGH POINT — Preservation North Carolina President and CEO Benjamin Briggs may be slightly biased, but in his opinion, the organization couldn't have picked a better city to host its annual statewide conference.

"I've been looking forward to bringing this conference to High Point for the first time in Preservation North Carolina's 88-year history," Briggs said. "The goal is to bring people together who love historic preservation so they can learn from each other, and we have so many incredible examples in the city of High Point to share with people."



Benjamin Briggs

The three-day conference is expected to bring up to 300 preservationists and preservation enthusiasts to High Point, Briggs' hometown. Activities will begin Sunday and continue through Tuesday.

Although the conference is appropriately headquartered at Market Square — a repurposed furniture factory — the agenda is packed with field sessions that will take participants all over town to learn about High Point's architectural and cultural history, and to see some of the city's many examples of historic preservation.

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Preservation North Carolina's annual conference unofficially begins Sunday, from 1 to 3 p.m. with an open house at First Baptist Church on North Main Street, where discussions are taking place to see how the historic church complex might be preserved. The open house is free and open to the public. A private reception for those who preregistered for the conference will be held later Sunday.

If you want to register for Monday and/or Tuesday's activities, you can do so at Market Square. The registration desk hours are 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Monday and 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday. For more information about registration or the conference, visit presnc.org.

HISTORY

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That includes walking tours of such historic neighborhoods as Emerywood, an architectural smorgasbord that was developed more than a century ago; Johnson Place, which was developed in 1908 as the city's first streetcar suburb; and the revitalized Washington Street, the focal point of High Point's Black history. The Washington Street tour will include looks at the all-Black William Penn High School (now Penn-Griffin School for the Arts) and the childhood home of jazz legend John Coltrane, who grew up in High Point.

Other places that will be showcased include the city's iconic Southern Railway Passenger Depot downtown; Quaker architecture such as the historic Allen Jay House and the century-old Museum for Old Domestic Life, both of which were once targeted for demolition; Market Square, which was developed from the old Tomlinson furniture factory; historic Oakwood Cemetery, where many of High Point's pioneers — both Black and white — are buried; and a few examples of the city's distinctive stone construction, including First Presbyterian Church, St. Mary's Episcopal Church and the Bienenstock Furniture Library.



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Market Square, a former furniture factory that has been repurposed, aptly will serve as headquarters for the upcoming annual conference of Preservation North Carolina. The conference is expected to bring about 300 preservationists and preservation enthusiasts to the city.

"Those are all-stone buildings," Briggs said. "You don't see that in Raleigh. You don't see that in Durham. You don't see that in Charlotte. But High Point's got it."

The conference will also include numerous classroom breakout sessions at Market Square, addressing such topics as cemetery preservation, the legacy of the "Green Book" in North Carolina, adaptive use, applying for grants, and much more.

Briggs, who became president of Preservation North Carolina in 2023, said he's proud to show the rest of the state what High Point has done — and continues to do — in the field of historic preservation.

"High Point's really at the cutting edge of preservation and has been for a hundred years," he said. "It makes me really proud, but it also makes me eager to share this with the entire state. I want people to learn and be inspired by High Point."

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