

HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES

Goal HCR-1

Protect and celebrate Bristol's historic and cultural resources as essential elements of the Town's identity and future.

Policies:

1. Define, promote, and protect the institutions, buildings, landscapes, and traditions that represent Bristol's cultural heritage.
2. Continue to update and expand local and National Register listings of historic places and districts.
3. Incorporate historic resource protection into the Town's development review and long-range planning processes.
4. Coordinate historic preservation and planning policies among local boards, commissions, state agencies, and regional partners.
5. Monitor and protect archaeological resources in culturally sensitive areas, consistent with state law and professional standards.
6. Encourage the adaptive reuse of historic and underutilized buildings in ways that retain their architectural character and contribute to neighborhood vitality.

Goal HCR-2

Preserve and enhance the cultural vitality of Bristol by supporting community identity, events, and traditions.

Policies:

1. Identify and reinforce the cultural aspects that make Bristol a unique and desirable place to live.
2. Limit the adverse impact of new development on historic and cultural resources.
3. Support investment that strengthens Bristol's cultural institutions and historic character.
4. Expand interpretive initiatives that share Bristol's history including signage, trails, and heritage programs on land and water.
5. Collaborate with regional organizations to promote heritage tourism.

Goal HCR-3

Engage and educate the community to foster stewardship of historic and cultural resources for future generations.

Policies:

1. Increase public awareness of the value of Bristol's historic and cultural resources and their contribution to quality of life.
2. Encourage broad community involvement in preservation activities through education, outreach, and volunteer initiatives.
3. Ensure Town programs and financial resources support the long-term stewardship of historic and cultural assets.
4. Collaborate with descendant communities, tribal representatives, and partner organizations to expand public education and interpretation of Indigenous and African-American heritage in Bristol.

Goal HCR-4 *(Cross-Reference with Resiliency & Climate Element)*

Protect Bristol's historic waterfront resources from sea level rise, flooding, and coastal hazards while preserving architectural integrity.

Policies:

1. Embed historic-resource risk assessment and adaptation priorities into the Hazard Mitigation Plan and Town resiliency initiatives.
2. Support resilience retrofits that retain character-defining features and follow the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, with tailored guidance for Bristol's historic waterfront building types.
3. Pursue grants, tax incentives, and local tools (such as fee reductions or expedited review) to advance preservation-compatible resilience work.
4. Expand outreach to property owners and the public on risk, preparedness, and treatment options for historic properties, including archaeological resources.
5. Coordinate with Town departments, RIHPHC, Bristol Historical & Preservation Society, Roger Williams University, and neighborhood groups to implement district-wide resilience strategies.

Goal HCR-5

Protect and enhance Bristol’s scenic corridors and byways to preserve community character, historic landscapes, and cultural identity while accommodating safe and context-sensitive transportation improvements.

Policies:

1. Preserve scenic qualities along designated roadways using zoning, design standards, and review in coordination with the Rhode Island Scenic Roadways Board.
2. Partner with RIDOT, the Scenic Roadways Board, and neighboring communities to implement the Scenic Roadways Stewardship Guidebook and the Revolutionary Heritage Byway Corridor Plan.
3. Require that roadway upgrades (such as pedestrian/bicycle facilities, drainage, or lighting) along scenic corridors are designed to maintain historic and cultural character.
4. Promote awareness and heritage tourism by integrating scenic roadways and the Revolutionary Heritage Byway into interpretive signage, marketing, and programming.

Goal HCR-6

Protect and strengthen Bristol’s historic districts by updating documentation, expanding local protections, and incorporating underrepresented histories into preservation planning.

Policies:

1. Use the 2024 Historic Resource Re-Survey as the baseline inventory for identifying and prioritizing historic resources.
2. Pursue recognition and protection for properties and areas eligible for—but not yet listed on—the State or National Register of Historic Places.
3. Expand the Historic District Overlay Zone to encompass omitted properties and align with updated National Register boundaries.
4. Promote inclusive preservation by documenting and protecting historic resources associated with immigration, industry, and communities of color.

Historic and Cultural Resources: National Register Sites and Districts

Bristol's cultural and architectural heritage is nationally recognized through multiple listings on the National Register of Historic Places, the federal government's official list of sites and districts significant in American history, architecture, and culture. These designations affirm the importance of Bristol's resources, make properties eligible for certain state and federal tax credits and grants, and strengthen preservation planning.

The National Register districts and properties identified and mapped in this Plan (see NCR Map 1) illustrate Bristol's growth from a colonial seaport to a 19th- and 20th-century civic, cultural, and resort community. Although listing on the National Register does not prevent private owners from altering or demolishing a property, it provides a foundation for local stewardship, planning decisions, and funding opportunities. By including these resources within the Comprehensive Plan, the Town affirms that preservation is a priority in guiding land use and development decisions.

National Register Historic Districts

- **Bristol Waterfront Historic District** (*listed March 18, 1975*) – Encompasses Bristol's downtown waterfront core, including Hope Street, Thames Street, and the harbor edge. The district contains a dense concentration of Federal, Greek Revival, and Victorian architecture that reflects Bristol's early settlement, maritime trade, and 18th–19th century prosperity. Today, the district remains the heart of civic, commercial, and cultural life in Bristol.
- **Poppasquash Farms Historic District** (*listed June 27, 1980*) – A large cultural landscape on Poppasquash Neck that includes early farmsteads, Gilded Age estates, stone walls, and shoreline views. The district illustrates Bristol's transformation from agricultural land to a summer retreat for prominent families and retains a distinctive rural and scenic character.

Individually Listed National Register Properties

- **Bristol County Court House, High Street** (*listed April 28, 1970*) – A monumental Greek Revival courthouse built in 1816, symbolizing Bristol's historic role as the county seat.
- **Bristol County Jail, 48 Court Street** (*listed April 24, 1973*) – Constructed in 1828, this austere stone jail is a rare surviving early correctional facility in Rhode Island.
- **Bristol Customs House and Post Office, Hope Street** (*listed May 31, 1972*) – A granite federal building erected in 1858, reflecting Bristol's 19th-century maritime commerce and government presence.
- **Joseph Reynolds House (National Historic Landmark), 956 Hope Street** (*listed May 31, 1972; NHL 1983*) – Built in 1700, this is the oldest documented house in

Bristol, significant for its Colonial architecture and role in Revolutionary War history.

- **Longfield / Charles Dana Gibson House, 1200 Hope Street** (*listed July 17, 1972*) – A Gothic Revival estate built in 1848, later the home of illustrator Charles Dana Gibson.
- **Mount Hope Farm / Governor William Bradford House, Metacom Avenue** (*listed May 2, 1977*) – A Colonial-era farmstead and residence with deep roots in Bristol’s 17th-century history, later expanded with farm buildings and open landscapes.
- **Mount Hope Bridge, Route 114** (*listed January 3, 1976*) – A 1929 suspension bridge linking Bristol to Portsmouth, notable as an example of early 20th-century bridge engineering.
- **Blithewold, Ferry Road** (*listed June 27, 1980*) – A turn-of-the-century estate with a grand mansion and nationally significant gardens, emblematic of Bristol’s role as a summer colony for wealthy families.
- **Bristol Ferry Lighthouse, Ferry Road** (*listed February 25, 1988*) – An 1855 stone lighthouse built to aid navigation in Mount Hope Bay, part of Bristol’s maritime heritage.
- **Benjamin Church Home / Benjamin Church Home for Aged Men, 1014 Hope Street** (*listed September 22, 1983*) – An Italianate institutional building constructed in the 1870s as one of the earliest elder care homes in the nation.
- **Juniper Hill Cemetery, 24 Sherry Avenue** (*listed June 3, 1998*) – A landscaped 19th-century “rural cemetery” featuring winding drives, funerary art, and mature trees, part of the garden cemetery movement.

Bristol Waterfront Historic District Re-Survey (2023–2024)

In 2023–2024, the Town of Bristol completed a comprehensive Re-Survey of the Bristol Waterfront Historic District (BWHD), which was originally listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. The re-survey was conducted by Preservation Strategies (Shantia Anderheggen) in collaboration with the Bristol Historical & Preservation Society (Catherine Zipf), and funded through a Certified Local Government (CLG) preservation grant. This was the first full re-evaluation of the district since 1978, and it provides the most current and detailed assessment of Bristol’s historic resources.

The study documented a total of 1,132 resources within the district, including buildings, sites, structures, and objects. Of these, 813 were identified as contributing resources that retain historic integrity, while 278 were classified as non-contributing, and 41 were identified as needing further evaluation. The re-survey also assessed integrity issues, boundary inconsistencies, and gaps in the district’s original 1975 nomination.

The re-survey revealed several important findings that are relevant to historic preservation and future planning in Bristol:

- **Previously Omitted Properties:** The survey identified 56 historically and architecturally significant properties that were omitted from the 1978 inventory list but are located within the district. These include residences along Bay View Avenue, the St. Michael's Church Bell Tower, the outbuildings of Linden Place, and St. Elizabeth's Church. Although not currently listed, these resources meet the criteria for National Register eligibility and merit stronger protection.
- **Boundary Discrepancies:** The survey confirmed that the 1975 nomination contained errors and inconsistencies that left several historic areas out of the district. For example, historically significant properties on Washington Street, Bay View Avenue, Bay Street, and Walley Street were excluded despite their clear contribution to the historic fabric of Bristol.
- **Expanded Period of Significance:** The re-survey confirmed that the district's period of significance extends from 1680 through 1974, reflecting not only Bristol's colonial and early maritime heritage but also the important industrial and community development that occurred in the mid-20th century.
- **Underrepresented Themes:** The study noted that the 1975 nomination did not fully capture important stories of industrial development, immigration, and the history of Bristol's Black and immigrant communities. The survey recommends that these themes be incorporated into future historic preservation planning to ensure a more inclusive record of Bristol's history.
- **Potential New or Expanded Districts:** Areas were identified for possible expansion or the creation of new historic districts. These include a **Northern Hope Street Historic District** that would extend beyond the current National Register boundary, and a potential **Wood Street / "New Goree" Neighborhood District**, which would recognize the historic African American community that lived in the area between ca. 1790–1920.

Based on these findings, the survey set forth several recommendations for the Town of Bristol:

1. **Update the National Register Nomination** for the Bristol Waterfront Historic District to add omitted properties, correct technical errors, expand the district boundaries, and formally recognize the broader themes of Bristol's industrial, immigrant, and African American history.
2. **Expand the Local Historic District (Overlay Zone)** so that it aligns with the full National Register boundary and includes properties that were historically excluded. This would provide consistent local regulatory protection across the entire historic district.
3. **Evaluate and Nominate New Districts**, particularly along Northern Hope Street and within the Wood Street / New Goree neighborhood. Both areas possess concentrations of resources that contribute to Bristol's heritage but have not yet been formally recognized.
4. **Support Inclusive Preservation Efforts** by documenting underrepresented stories and integrating them into preservation policy, public education, and

heritage tourism. This would strengthen Bristol's identity as a community with a layered and diverse past.

Bristol Historic District Commission

The Bristol Historic District Commission (BHDC), established in 1987, safeguards the Town's historic development patterns, architectural character, and cultural landscapes. Its jurisdiction includes 619 properties, most within the Bristol Historic District, with 35 individually designated for review due to their exceptional historical or architectural significance.

The BHDC serves as a design review body for exterior changes to properties within the District. Any alteration, repair, demolition, or new construction requires a Certificate of Appropriateness to ensure compatibility with the property's historic character and the district as a whole. The Commission relies on written Design Guidelines and provides technical assistance to property owners, reinforcing its role as both a regulatory and educational body.

Key features of the process include:

- Mandatory review for exterior changes visible from a public way (interior work is not subject to review).
- Clarification that landscaping and paint color are generally excluded, except for major features such as walls or fences.
- Administrative review available for minor projects.
- Public hearings held monthly, where applications are reviewed and approved, denied, or continued.
- Concept review option for early consultation with the Commission.

The District reflects Bristol's architectural and cultural heritage through its buildings, structures, sites, and settings. Preservation oversight by the BHDC ensures this legacy is protected while allowing for sensitive adaptation and reuse. By combining regulation with education and technical guidance, the Commission helps property owners understand best practices and supports preservation as a community partnership.

Climate Vulnerability of Historic Resources (Bristol Waterfront Historic District)

In September 2022, with Certified Local Government (CLG) funding from RIHPHC, the Town of Bristol partnered with Preservation Strategies (Shantia Anderheggen) and the Bristol Historical & Preservation Society (Catherine Zipf) to assess the vulnerability of historic resources within the Bristol Waterfront Historic District (BWHD)—a National Register district listed in 1975—to 2 feet of sea-level rise and related coastal hazards.

The study was intended to inform the Comprehensive Plan and the Town's Hazard Mitigation Plan.

Key Findings

- At-risk inventory: 33+ historically and architecturally significant properties in the BWHD are highly vulnerable under a 2-foot SLR scenario within the 100-year flood zone.
- Building types: Residential structures—both single-family and multi-family—represent the largest share of at-risk resources; selected commercial/mixed-use properties are also exposed.
- Value at risk: The assessed value of the 33 highest-significance properties is approximately \$40 million, underscoring the cultural and economic stakes.
- Escalating impacts: Tidal flooding and storm-related inundation in the district are increasing in frequency, threatening building integrity, public safety, and the district's historic character.

Study Recommendations

- Mainstream preservation in hazard planning: Integrate at-risk historic resources, including archaeological sensitivity, into Hazard Mitigation Plan updates, emergency operations, and capital planning.
- Resilience design approach: Create practical, preservation-sensitive strategies for elevation, floodproofing, utilities relocation, and materials selection that protect historic fabric.
- Funding & incentives: Pursue FEMA/RIEMA mitigation funds, CLG grants, state/federal tax credits, and local incentives to help owners implement compliant resilience retrofits.
- Data & monitoring: Maintain an up-to-date mapped inventory of at-risk resources (structures and archaeological areas) with condition, priority, and adaptation status.
- Public engagement: Offer owner guidance, hands-on clinics, and model details; deploy interpretive materials to communicate both risk and preservation value.

Archaeological Resources

Bristol's archaeological record demonstrates thousands of years of Native American presence. The most significant public example is the Waypoyset Preserve at the Narrows, Mount Hope, where surveys have identified artifacts dating back to

approximately 7,000 B.C. This site, recognized as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, underscores the long-term settlement and cultural importance of the Mount Hope area and its associations with Wampanoag history and the leadership of Metacom (King Philip).

In addition to prehistoric evidence, Bristol's historic waterfront has revealed important industrial-era remains. Excavations during redevelopment at the Belvedere and Thames Street area uncovered the remnants of an early nineteenth-century rum distillery. Archaeologists have noted this as one of the most significant rum-distillery finds in the Northeast, also considered eligible for the National Register. These findings highlight Bristol's maritime economy and its connections to international trade during the height of the town's port activity.

While precise archaeological site locations remain protected, the Comprehensive Plan identifies two broad zones of high archaeological sensitivity: the Mount Hope/Narrows area, due to extensive Indigenous use and cultural associations, and the downtown waterfront, where industrial and maritime archaeology can be expected. Bristol also forms part of the Sowams Heritage Area, a regional cultural landscape that encompasses the ancestral homelands of the Pokanoket people and other Indigenous communities. Sowams contains numerous archaeological and cultural sites tied to Indigenous history, early colonial settlement, and events such as King Philip's War.

Inclusive Heritage and Recent Recognitions

In 2025, Bristol became home to a new international heritage designation with the installation of *Our Ancestors Come With Us*, a bronze sculpture in Independence Park. The park was recognized as a UNESCO "Site of Memory" within the Routes of Enslaved Peoples Project, acknowledging Bristol's role in the transatlantic slave trade and honoring the resilience of African-descended peoples. The designation broadens the community's understanding of its past and creates opportunities for interpretation, education, and tourism. Along with Bristol's role in the Sowams Heritage Area, it highlights the importance of recognizing Indigenous, African American, and immigrant experiences as integral parts of the town's history. These recognitions strengthen Bristol's cultural identity and underscore its national and international significance.

Cultural Assets and Community Life

Bristol is home to a wide range of cultural institutions that are central to the town's identity as both a historic destination and a vibrant community. Churches, ethnic and social clubs, and major landmarks such as the historic State House, Blithewold, the Bristol Historical and Preservation Society, Coggeshall Farm, the Herreshoff Marine Museum, Linden Place Museum, the Bristol Art Museum, Mount Hope Farm, and the Audubon Society's Environmental Education Center contribute to Bristol's distinctive character. These institutions enrich community life, attract visitors, and generate

economic activity, and town policies should continue to support their success and growth.

The community also benefits from an active cultural calendar. The Bristol Fourth of July Parade, organized by the Fourth of July Committee, anchors a series of events that celebrate civic pride. School-based programs such as Mosaico's Sense of Pride engage young people in local history and traditions. Volunteer organizations further contribute to this vitality: Bristol Blooms enhances Hope Street with seasonal plantings, while the Bristol Garden Club's Daffodil Program brings color and community spirit each spring through the planting of thousands of bulbs across town. Explore Bristol complements these efforts with coordinated marketing to promote tourism and cultural events.

The cultural assets described here are not a complete list, but they demonstrate the breadth of institutions, organizations, and events that contribute to Bristol's unique identity and its reputation as a cultural and historic destination.

Key Cultural Institutions and Organizations in Bristol

Museums & Historic Sites

- **Historic State House** – A landmark of Rhode Island's early civic life and an enduring symbol of Bristol's role in state history.
- **Blithewold Mansion, Gardens & Arboretum** – A nationally recognized estate and public garden showcasing Gilded Age architecture and horticultural design.
- **Bristol Historical & Preservation Society (BH&PS)** – Maintains archives, collections, and programming that document and celebrate Bristol's history.
- **Coggeshall Farm Museum** – A living history site interpreting 18th-century agrarian life in Rhode Island.
- **Herreshoff Marine Museum** – Preserves Bristol's maritime heritage, particularly its legacy of yacht design and America's Cup racing.
- **Linden Place Museum** – A Federal-style mansion and cultural venue offering tours, exhibits, and events.
- **Bristol Art Museum** – A contemporary art museum hosting exhibitions, educational programs, and community arts initiatives.
- **Mount Hope Farm** – A historic farmstead and community gathering place that hosts markets, events, and public programming.
- **Audubon Society Environmental Education Center** – Provides exhibits, trails, and programming focused on coastal ecology and environmental education.

Arts, Culture & Events

- **Bristol Theatre Company** – A community theatre group founded in 1983 that continues to produce performances, but is currently lacking a permanent venue.
- **Bristol Fourth of July Committee** – Organizes the nationally renowned Fourth of July Parade and a series of related community events.

- **Live Music & Festivals** – Bristol hosts a summer concert series and PorchFest on High Street each fall, both of which bring residents and visitors together to celebrate music and community.
- **Mosaico, Inc.** – Provides cultural and educational programming, including the Sense of Pride initiative in local schools.

Volunteer & Civic Organizations

- **Bristol Blooms** – A volunteer group that plants and maintains hanging flower baskets along Hope Street.
- **Bristol Garden Club** – Enhances the Town’s landscape and civic pride, most notably through its Daffodil Program which has planted thousands of bulbs across Bristol.
- **Explore Bristol** – Coordinates marketing and tourism initiatives to promote Bristol as a cultural and historic destination.

Scenic Corridors and Byways

Bristol’s historic streetscapes and waterfront roadways are central to the Town’s identity and its tourism economy. Several corridors are formally recognized for their scenic and cultural value at both the state and federal levels.

State Scenic Roadways. Hope Street (Route 114) and High Street are designated as State Scenic Roadways by the Rhode Island Scenic Roadways Board. This designation requires review of roadway alterations, tree trimming, and other changes to ensure that scenic qualities are preserved. The designation applies to the full length of Route 114 from the Warren town line to the Mount Hope Bridge (known locally as Hope Street and Ferry Road) and to High Street, providing an added layer of protection by requiring State review for certain projects.

Revolutionary Heritage Byway. The Revolutionary Heritage Byway, designated a National Scenic Byway in 2021, extends for about six miles through Warren and Bristol. Within Bristol, the Byway follows Route 114 from the Warren town line south through the historic downtown, past waterfront parks, cultural landmarks, and civic institutions, to the Mount Hope Bridge. This corridor highlights nationally significant historic, cultural, and scenic resources, and recent federal funding has supported improvements that balance safety and infrastructure upgrades with preservation of character.

The Town recognizes that scenic byways are more than transportation routes—they are living cultural landscapes that shape Bristol’s community character, visitor experience, and economic vitality. Protecting them requires coordinated planning across transportation, land use, preservation, and tourism.

Relevant State Guide Plan Elements & Reference Documents

1. [Element 210 – Historic Preservation \(2020–2027\)](#)
Protecting Our Legacy of Buildings, Places, and Culture. Provides statewide preservation goals, policies, and strategies (survey updates, Certified Local Government program, climate risk, inclusion of underrepresented heritage, easements, demolition delay).
2. [Element 121 – Land Use 2025](#)
State’s overarching land use policy framework — directing growth while conserving resources and protecting community character, historic landscapes, and scenic roadways.
3. [Element 152 – Ocean State Outdoors: Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan \(SCORP, 2019\)](#)
Guides recreation and open space, and explicitly links cultural resources, scenic landscapes, and heritage tourism to quality of life.
4. [Element 611 – Moving Forward RI 2040 \(Long-Range Transportation Plan\)](#)
Rhode Island’s statewide transportation plan; includes policies on context-sensitive design, bike/pedestrian infrastructure, safety, and resilience — directly relevant for scenic corridors and byway management.

Scenic Roadways & Byways References

- [RIDOT Scenic Roadways Program](#) – Designates Hope Street (Route 114) and High Street in Bristol as official scenic roadways, requiring review of changes.
- [Rhode Island Scenic Roadways Stewardship Guidebook](#) – Guidance on managing scenic corridors (viewsheds, landscaping, signage, lighting).
- [Revolutionary Heritage Byway](#) – A state byway (2000) and National Scenic Byway (2021) that runs through Bristol; recently awarded federal funding for upgrades.

Consistency with the State Guide Plan and State Standards

This Comprehensive Plan element is prepared in conformance with Rhode Island’s State Guide Plan and the Comprehensive Planning Standards Manual (2021). It is consistent with:

- **Element 210 – Historic Preservation**, by advancing local preservation goals, supporting survey updates, adaptive reuse, and protection of cultural resources.
- **Element 121 – Land Use 2025**, by directing growth and conservation in ways that preserve Bristol’s historic landscapes and scenic roadways.
- **Element 152 – Ocean State Outdoors (SCORP)**, by recognizing the role of cultural landscapes, scenic corridors, and heritage tourism in recreation and community vitality.
- **Element 611 – Moving Forward RI 2040**, by promoting context-sensitive design and multimodal improvements along scenic byways.

The Town also coordinates with RIDOT's Scenic Roadways Program and applies the Rhode Island Scenic Roadways Stewardship Guidebook to manage designated corridors.