

National Visitation Report

Research conducted by the American Association for State and Local History

November 2019



Do Americans still visit history organizations?

This simple question is remarkably difficult to answer. In recent years, well-publicized reports of visitation declines at high-profile institutions have provided cause for concern among professionals and the public alike. But these isolated reports provide only an incomplete picture of Americans' engagement with history. This report, based on the **American Association for State and Local History's** National Visitation Survey distributed in early 2019, collected data from institutions across the country to provide a better answer.

Our analysis reveals that, in fact, history organizations have reason for optimism: **visitation to history organizations increased over the past six years**. Since 2013, visitation to history organizations of all kinds increased **5.7 percent**, although it declined slightly from a peak in 2017. The total U.S. population, by comparison, grew about 4 percent over the same period. In addition, small history organizations—which make up the majority of the field—reported some of the largest visitation growth.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Visitation **increased 5.7 percent** from 2013-2018.

Small organizations saw the **largest growth**.

Visitation **declined slightly** from 2017 to 2018.

General Findings

Between 2013 and 2018, visitation to history organizations grew by 5.7 percent: it rose 7.7 percent between 2013 and 2017 and fell 1.9 percent from 2017 to 2018.



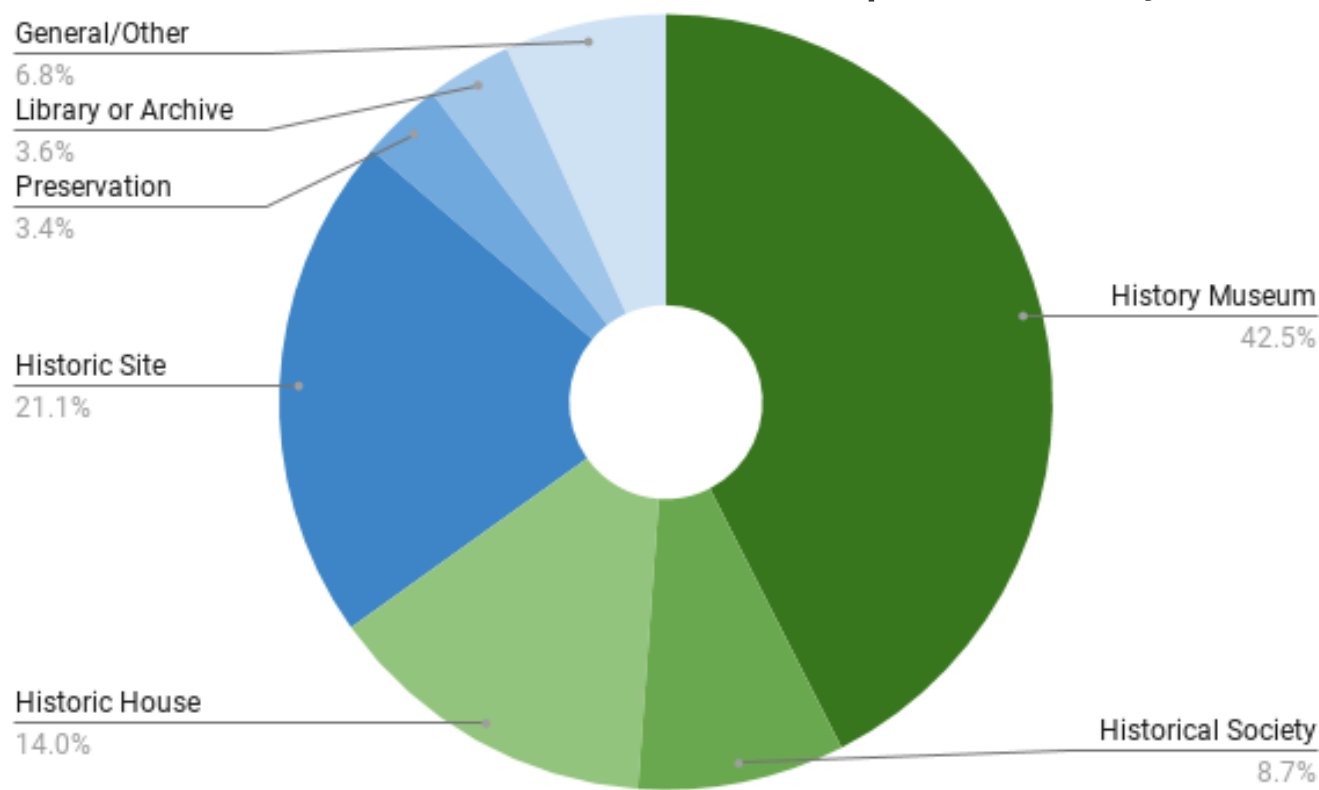
overall increase in visitation to history organizations from 2013 to 2018



decline in visitation from 2017 to 2018

Survey Responses

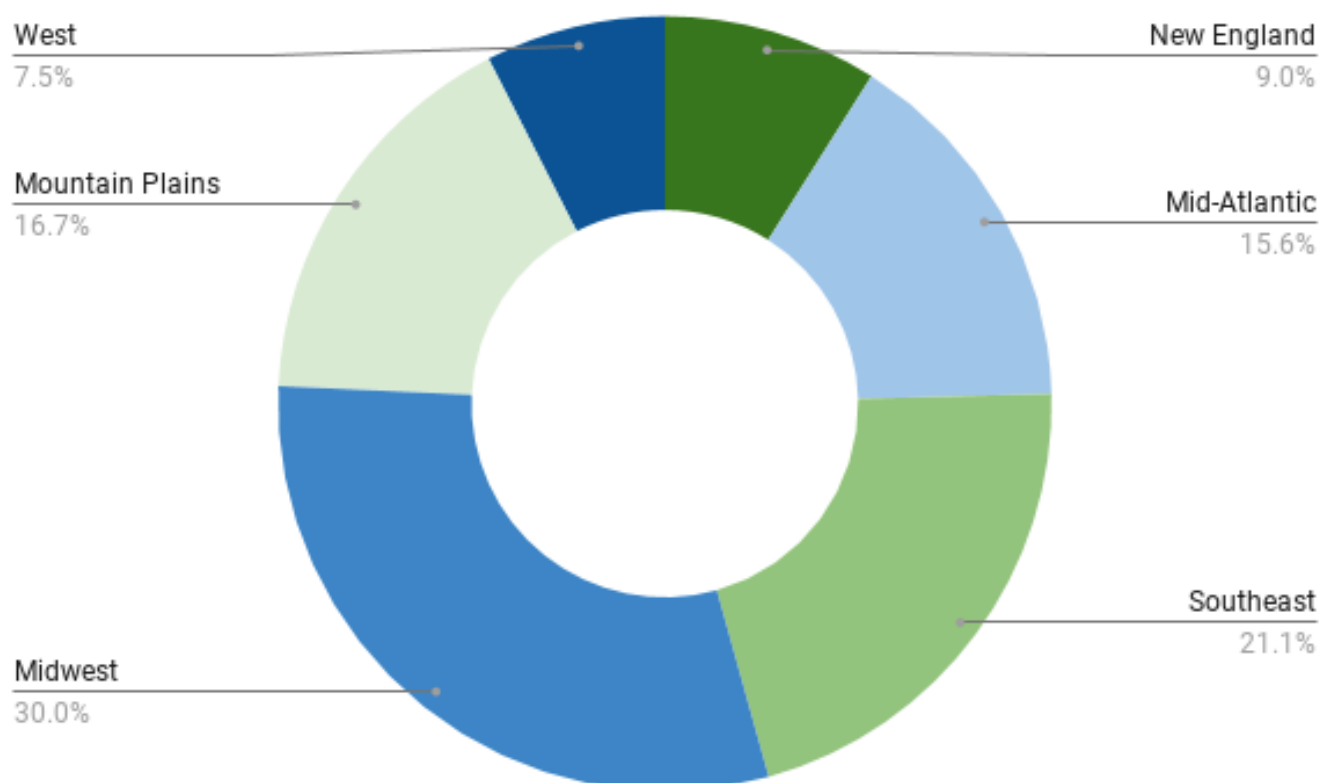
Respondents by Function



We received 1,257 responses to our National Visitation Survey during Spring 2019.

Survey Response

Respondents by Region



The National Visitation Survey will open again in January of 2020.

Budget Levels

While these numbers offer a broad overview of trends in the field, we gather a more accurate view by looking at visitation for institutions that share similar budget sizes.

History organizations with budgets of less than \$50,000 per year experienced the strongest growth of any budget level, 18 percent since 2013. Organizations with budgets between \$50,000 and \$250,000 saw an increase of nearly 13 percent over the same period. These smaller sites represent the majority of survey responses (59 percent), a figure consistent with AASLH's estimate about the proportion of small history organizations within our community.

Visitation increases at larger-budget institutions align with the broader national pattern: an overall increase, with a slight decrease from 2017 to 2018. The exception to this is institutions in the \$5–\$10 million range. Those institutions saw a 17 percent increase since 2013, including 1 percent growth from 2017 to 2018.



Small history organizations experienced the strongest growth.

Growth in Visitation by Institution Budget

↑ 18%
<\$50k

↑ 12.7%
\$50k-250k

↑ 3.1%
\$250k-500k

↑ 10.5%
\$500k-1 million

Visitation at every budget level increased between 2013 and 2018.

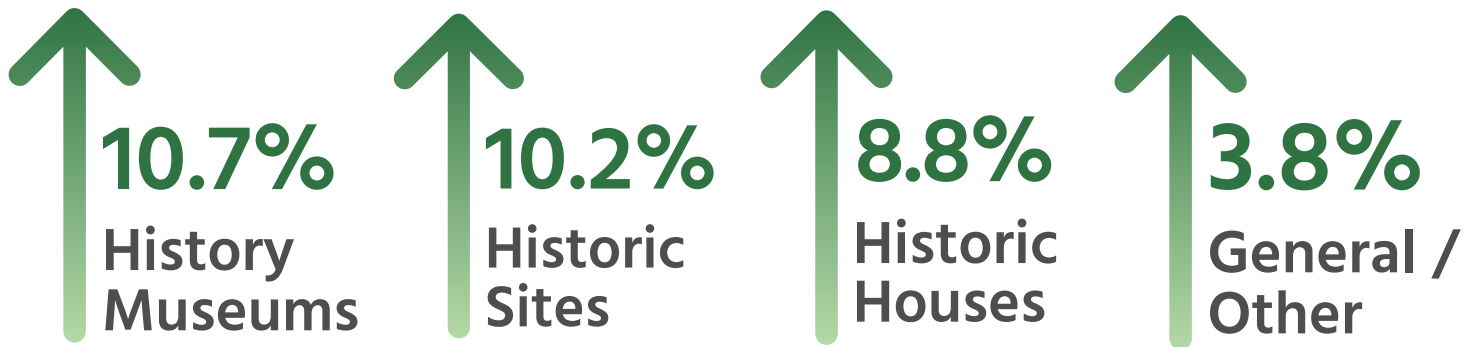
↑ 8.6%
\$1-2.25 million

↑ 5.1%
\$2.5-5 million

↑ 17%
\$5-10 million

↑ 7.1%
> \$10 million

Function



History Museums

History museums experienced some of the strongest growth in visitation of any type of historical organization, increasing **10.7 percent since 2013**. Increases occurred across budget levels, with the strongest gains at museums with budgets smaller than \$250,000.

Historic Sites

Average visitation to **historic sites was similarly strong, increasing by 10.2 percent since 2013**.

These findings align with AASLH's separate analysis of National Park Service (NPS) historic site visitation, which also shows a rise in visitation over the past decade.

Historic Houses

Visitation to **historic houses has risen since 2013 by about 8.8 percent**, a trend consistent across most budget levels.

General & Other

Respondents in the General/Other category **experienced a 3.8 percent increase in average visitation since 2013**. Because the organizations under this category are all different kinds of institutions (campsites, non-history museums, cultural centers, etc.), visitation among each may be affected by widely different trends.



Function



Preservation

Few preservation organizations responded to our survey. Within our sample, visitation to these organizations saw just a **0.2 percent increase over the period**, with large gains from 2013 to 2017 offset by a large decline in 2018.

Historical Societies

Average annual **visitation to historical societies decreased nearly 7 percent**. Small historical societies, the vast majority of our respondents, saw increases in visitation, while major declines at larger institutions pulled the average down.

Libraries & Archives

We also received only a **small number of responses (45) from libraries and archives**, visitation to which can be quite different than at other history institutions. Based on our responses, it appears that in-person visits to libraries and archives has fallen since 2013.

History organizations saw a
5.7 percent increase
in visitation from 2013-2018.

Region



19.4%

**Mountain
Plains**



12.7%

West



8.4%

Southeast



Mountain Plains

The Mountain Plains region has experienced substantial growth in visitation to history organizations. **Average annual visitation grew 19.4 percent to sites in this region.** Visitation to the smaller organizations in this region increased the most dramatically, but larger ones experienced strong growth as well.

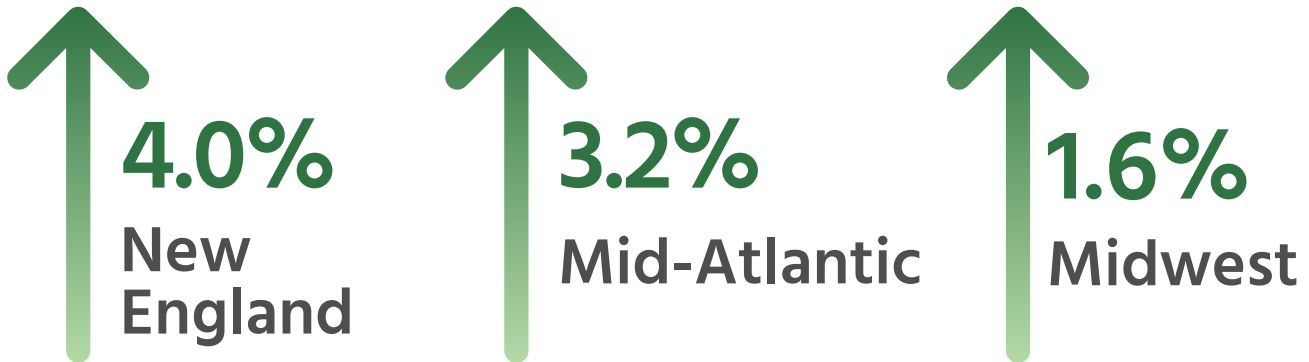
West

For the West, **visitation for all history organizations increased 12.7 percent** over the period. Visitation to Western museums specifically increased substantially, more than 22 percent from 2013 to 2018.

Southeast

Visitation to Southeastern institutions **rose 8.4 percent** from 2013 to 2018, with growth across most institutions types: historic house visitation increased 9.5 percent, historic site visitation 6.7 percent, and museum visitation rose 7.9 percent.

Region



New England

New England institutions experienced a **4 percent increase since 2013**. Further inspection, however, reveals more mixed results: a major outlier experienced more than a 50 percent visitation decline and was not included in this calculation of the region's total; when that data is included, the 4 percent increase becomes a **3.9 percent decline**. Further, **New England organizations with budgets of less than \$50,000 saw a 1.9 percent decrease in visitors**; this budget level saw major gains in all other regions.

Mid-Atlantic

Average annual visitation to **Mid-Atlantic institutions increased 3.2 percent**. Average annual attendance rose 2.6 percent from 2013 to 2017 and another 0.6 percent in 2018. Visitation to Mid-Atlantic historic houses rose 6.4 percent, while visitation to historical societies in the region bucked national trends with major increases.

Midwest

Average annual visitation to history institutions in the **Midwest has risen 1.6 percent** since 2013. It rose 6.52 percent from 2013 to 2017 and fell 4.66 percent in 2018. Historical societies in the Midwest experienced the biggest gains, increasing 40.7 percent overall increase, one of the single largest increases of any category. Historic houses in the Midwest also saw major gains in visitation, rising 20.4 percent.

Average annual visitation increased in every region of the country between 2013 and 2018.

Conclusion

With few exceptions, average visitation to history organizations has risen since 2013, no matter their type, cost, or geographic region. Our survey combined with other outside data does, however, point to a visitation decline starting in 2016. Visitation over the next several years should be monitored carefully to determine if this is truly part of a broader trend.

Analysis of nationwide trends like visitation requires the best data we can gather. As such, in order to provide the most thorough and accurate possible reports each year, AASLH needs your help: please respond to our survey of 2019 visitation when it is distributed in early 2020.

Methodology

AASLH gathered the data provided in this report through our “National Visitation Survey for History Organizations,” for which responses were accepted between January 11, 2019, and April 30, 2019. AASLH shared the survey with both members and non-members across the field and collected 1,257 responses. We asked each respondent to report their institution’s visitation total for three years—2013, 2017, and 2018—in addition to several questions about the characteristics of their institution (e.g. budget size, governance structure, function). The analysis in this report is based on the mean number of visitors reported for each of the three years (2013, 2017, 2018), from which we calculated percentage changes to more accurately draw comparisons between institutions of different sizes and types. We also calculated proportion margins of error. Larger sample sizes result in smaller margins of error and more accurate and confident responses.

A longer, more extensive report on the survey data is available at learn.aaslh.org, accessible to all and free for AASLH Partner institutions. The full report contains full tables and a more detailed analysis of each region, budget level, and other criteria.

The National Visitation Survey will open again in January of 2020.

Keep an eye out for an email announcement when
the survey opens!