

# Local Preservation

A service of the National Park Service  
Distributed by Interagency Resources Division, Washington, D.C.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT HISTORIC PROPERTIES SURVEY

### 1. What is a historic properties survey?

A historic properties survey is a study designed to identify and evaluate properties in an area – a community, a neighborhood, a rural area, the area of a proposed land-use project – to determine whether they may be of historic, architectural, archeological, engineering or cultural significance.

### 2. What do you mean by “historic properties?”

The national historic preservation program deals with the full range of properties significant in American history, prehistory, architecture, engineering, archeology, and culture, including properties significant to the whole nation, those significant to a particular State or region, and those significant at the local level. “Historic property” is the shorthand term for all these kinds of properties.

### 3. Why do a survey?

Perhaps the foremost reason – as will be discussed below – is to know where historic properties are so that their protection and improvement can be considered in planning new projects and use of the land. A second reason is to increase public understanding of, and interest in, an area’s history and historic properties, through publication or other use of the information in the survey itself. A third reason is to identify properties whose owners may be eligible for various kinds of Federal, State, and local assistance if they want to restore, preserve, or rehabilitate them. A fourth reason is to provide a data base for research in history or prehistory.

### 4. What information does a survey produce?

The survey will produce written reports, files or photographs, perhaps videotapes or audio tapes, maps showing areas surveyed at different levels of intensity, drawings, plans, and bibliographic information on background data. Based on these data, and an evaluation of the properties recorded, an organized inventory can be produced listing properties that have been evaluated and found to be historic, together with a list of properties found not to be historic.

### 5. What do you mean by “different levels of intensity?”

Two general levels of survey coverage are usually recognized. An **intensive** survey is one in which the entire study area is inspected so closely that, within a reasonable margin of error, it can be assumed that all historic properties of all kinds have been found. A **reconnaissance** survey is a “once over lightly” inspection that provides a general idea of the kinds of historic properties that may be present, and perhaps documents a few in detail, but does not necessarily identify them all. For example, a reconnaissance survey might reveal that there are

historic commercial buildings within the survey area and provide a few examples. An intensive survey of the same area would reveal exactly how many historic commercial buildings there are in the survey area.

There are also “different levels of intensity” in the amount of information gathered about each property identified in the survey. “National Register Level of Documentation” means there is sufficient information to nominate the property to the National Register of Historic Places. “A Minimum Level of Documentation” means that there is enough information about a property to make an initial evaluation of its significance, but not enough information to put together a National Register nomination.

#### 6. Are there also different kinds of surveys?

Yes. The kind of survey you do depends on the kinds of properties you have to deal with, and the purposes you’re trying to serve. Some examples are:

- \* “Predictive” survey, usually applied to large areas (a whole community, a large rural area), in which predictions are made about where historic properties of different kinds will be found, based on background research, and then these predictions are tested through inspection of sample blocks or tracts of land.

- \* “Windshield” survey, which means literally driving the streets or roads looking for buildings, structures, or groups of buildings and structures that may be historic.

- \* Intensive architectural survey, which means a very detailed survey, but one that concentrates only on standing buildings and structures.

- \* Thematic survey, which means a detailed survey concentrating on specific property types (e.g. apartment buildings, school houses).

- \* Intensive archeological survey, which concentrates on identifying archeological sites and may involve detailed inspection of land surfaces coupled with small-scale excavations to find buried sites.

- \* Oral historical survey, which involves the extensive use of interviews with people who are knowledgeable about local history or about the cultural patterns (e.g. the traditions of an ethnic neighborhood) that may give significance to an area.

There are other kinds of surveys as well, and all of the above can be combined in different ways, depending on the purpose of the survey and what background research tells you about the kinds of historic properties that are likely to be present.

#### 7. What do you mean by “background research?”

It is a very bad idea to start looking for historical properties without first developing a good understanding of the area’s history, prehistory, traditional and contemporary land use patterns and social groups, and so on. Lacking such understanding, you may miss significant properties, or evaluate properties incorrectly, or literally not know what you’re looking at. Every good survey begins with a background study of written sources on the area – not only published local histories, but sources of primary data such as tax maps, unpublished journals and historical,

archeological or ethnographic data held by universities, colleges, museums, historical or archeological societies, and other institutions. It is usually appropriate to continue such research as the field survey itself gets underway, because the field survey is likely to raise questions that can be answered only through further background research.

8. How does the purpose of the survey affect how it is done?

If you are undertaking a survey in advance of a project that will result in demolition of buildings and disturbance of the land, you will probably want to try to identify all the historic properties that may be affected, so that they can be considered in planning and, if possible, preserved. If the project involves only the rehabilitation of existing buildings, however, you may not need to identify archeological sites, and may need a less intensive survey of buildings and structures than would be necessary if demolition were likely. If your survey is carried out as part of a long-term program of community planning or land-use planning, you may find it best to begin with background research and a predictive survey, providing a basis for more detailed reconnaissance and intensive surveys later on, as planning proceeds. If your purpose is research, you may want to focus on a particular kind of historic property, representing a particular period, style of construction, or type of land-use.

9. What sorts of records should be kept regarding the methods used in the survey?

It is very important to maintain records about what kind of survey you did, and about any variations there may have been in the methods used in different parts of the area surveyed. If such records are not kept, future users of the survey results may assume that a given area was, for example, subjected to an intensive survey when in fact it was given only a reconnaissance, or that it was subjected to architectural survey when only archeological sites were sought. If the survey results are misinterpreted in this way in connection with planning a construction or land-use project, historic properties can be unnecessarily destroyed. On the other hand, if good records are not kept, future users may not be able to figure out which areas have and have not been surveyed, and may spend unnecessary time and money on further survey.

10. How can the public participate in surveys?

Surveys should be designed and overseen by experienced people, generally with professional training in history, archeology, architectural history and other pertinent fields, or at least in consultation with such people. Actual background research and field survey, however, can be carried out by volunteers, students, community groups, and other members of the public interested in participating. Organization of survey data, or of systems and standards for the maintenance of such data, should be supervised by professionals.

11. How are surveys funded?

Funds may be available from your State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO). The National Park Service provides grants-in-aid for surveys from the Historic Preservation Fund, which can be subgranted by SHPO's to local governments and others to carry out survey projects. Some States have other funding for survey work that they can make available. Some States and local governments require land developers to pay for surveys in advance of their development projects, and payment for such surveys routinely required when a development project is conducted, assisted, or licensed by a Federal agency. Of course, local funding, private funding,

and funds from agencies and groups that provide grants for research projects in history, architecture, archeology, and other fields can be used.

## 12. How are the results of survey used in local planning?

One of the most important ways to use information from a survey is in local land-use and development planning. The following are a few of the ways that survey information can be integrated into such planning.

Comprehensive planning: Many States require that local governments develop comprehensive plans to guide their growth and development, and assist them in developing such plans. Some local governments have developed or are developing general plans without State direction. Among the basic functions of a general plan is to identify opportunities for and constraints on development. Historic properties may present both opportunities and constraints – opportunities for rehabilitation, for enhancing the quality of life, for public participation, and constraints on development that would destroy them or be insensitive to their important qualities. Based on survey data, areas within a community known or thought to contain historic properties can be identified in comprehensive plans, and the kinds of opportunities and constraints associated with each property or type of property can be identified. This information can then be factored into future decisions about specific development and land use projects.

Zoning: It is vital to try to minimize conflict between a community's historic preservation system and its zoning system. Otherwise zoning within historic districts or in areas where historic properties exist may permit uses that will destroy or diminish their historical, architectural, or archeological values. Where permitted by local and State law, survey data can be used to define a historic preservation zoning classification. If this is not possible, a historic preservation overlay can be created on the basis of survey data. When superimposed on zoning maps, the overlay identifies areas in which architectural design or modification of existing structures or land must be subjected to historic preservation review.

Ordinances: By demonstrating the fact that historic properties exist within a community, the results of a survey can be used to convince local lawmakers of the need for various kinds of protective ordinances. Moreover, survey data can be used to “fine-tune” local ordinances to ensure that they are effective and reasonable. For example, if the survey shows that one part of the community contains historic buildings but no archeological sites, while another contains archeological sites but no historic structures, an ordinance or ordinances might require review of the design of new buildings and additions in the first area and archeological survey and data recovery in advance of land disturbance in the other, but would not need to require both activities in both areas.

Influence on Federal Undertakings: Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires that Federal agencies take into account the effects of their undertakings on historic properties (See “What is Section 106 Review?”). Section 106 requires review of a wide range of activities, including activities carried out by local governments using Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. Local survey data can be used to ensure that a Federal agency (or a local government using CDBG funds) that plans to undertake, assist, or permit a project is aware that historic properties are (or are not) in the vicinity of its project area, so that they can be taken into account. This saves the Federal agency the trouble of identifying and evaluating properties itself, so it may help the project move forward. On the other hand, it puts the agency

on early notice that it must carry out its responsibilities under Section 106, so it increases the chance that the historic properties will be taken into consideration.

13. What if the survey isn't complete?

A survey does not need to be complete to be useful. A survey that has covered only part of a community will be useful to planning in those areas that have been covered, even if it is not helpful elsewhere. A survey that has addressed only standing structures and districts will be useful in deciding where design review of additions or demolitions should be required, even though it cannot be used to determine where archeological surveys and data recovery should or should not be required.

Ideally, a survey is conducted in stages of greater and greater detail and intensity. That is, initial work may involve only background research and small-scale field reconnaissance, such as a "windshield" survey (driving through a neighborhood or area, briefly recording apparently significant buildings), or a "spot-check" of areas thought to be archeologically important. Subsequent stages may involve more intensive survey of sample neighborhoods, streets, or pieces of land. Ultimately, very detailed intensive surveys may be conducted of areas where previous work indicates that particular kinds of properties are likely to exist, with fieldwork keyed to the kinds of properties expected (for example, archeological sites as opposed to standing structures).

At each stage in such a phased survey, the information created can be useful to planning. Early background research and reconnaissance can at least identify broad areas in which historic properties of different kinds are likely to occur, alerting local officials that developers should be required to conduct more detailed surveys of areas they propose to modify, so that they can consider historic properties in development planning. As more detailed information becomes available, of course, more detailed input can be provided to planning decisions. Officials will need to require fewer surveys by developers, and will be able to provide developers with more information, earlier, to guide them in their planning.

14. Are there standard forms and methods to use in survey?

Yes, all States have standard recording forms, and many have guidelines for completing survey work. These can be obtained from your State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), who can also provide valuable advice about methods to use, sources of background data, and professionals in various preservation-related fields who might be consulted. If you do not know who your SHPO is, you can find out, or obtain a current listing of all SHPO's, by contacting:

National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers  
444 North Capitol Street NW, Suite 332  
Washington, DC 20001  
(202)624-5465

15. Are there national guidelines for survey work?

Yes. These are necessarily less detailed and specific than those that may be available from SHPO's, but are particularly important to consult if you are conducting survey work as part of your participation in the national historic preservation program (for example, in preparing

nominations of properties to the National Register of Historic Places), or in conjunction with a project that uses Federal funds or needs a Federal permit or license. Some basic guidelines are listed below.

- ❖ The Secretary of the Interior's "Standards and Guidelines for Identification." (Federal Register, September 29, 1983, Vol. 48, No. 190, page 44720)
- ❖ The Secretary of the Interior's "Standards and Guidelines for Evaluation." (Federal Register, September 29, 1983, Vol. 48, No. 190, page 44723)
- ❖ Guidelines for Local Surveys: A Basis for Preservation Planning, National Register Bulletin 24; National Park Service, 1986.

Single copies available free of charge from The National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127.

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