

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 6 | Number 3

Article 5

3-21-1980

The National Register

Historic Huntsville Foundation

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Historic Huntsville Foundation (1980) "The National Register," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*: Vol. 6: No. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol6/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

The National Register

The following discussion of the National Register of Historic Places is presented to clear up some commonly voiced misconceptions about what the National Register actually is and the effect of listing a property on it.

The National Register is simply a listing of historic properties in the United States and its territories. Today this list includes approximately 15,000 properties of which about 13,500 are individual items while the remaining 1,500 are historic districts. An individual listing may consist of a building, such as the First Alabama Bank on the Square; a structure, such as the Redstone Test Stand; an object, such as the Saturn V Space Vehicle; or an archeological site.

Historic districts are a combination of buildings, spaces or archeological sites that are important in their totality although the components themselves may not qualify. Historic districts are most often neighborhoods containing a high concentration of historic buildings, often dating from approximately the same period, that taken as a group convey a sense of the period and society that erected them. The buildings constitute the most obvious resource in a district, but there are other elements that are just as important and that contribute to the ambiance of the neighborhood. These can include the kind of terrain and the way it was developed, the size of the building lots and the placement of the houses on them, the relationship of the houses to each other and to

the street, the landscaping, the presence of parks and other public spaces, the layout of the streets, and the relationship of the district to the surrounding areas. These considerations describe those qualities that can give a neighborhood cohesiveness and a historical identity worth preserving. For this reason, it is not enough just to preserve the buildings in a district; the historic setting must also be respected, because that is what gives meaning to the structures. For the same reason the small modest houses are as important as the large mansions: together they convey a sense of the past that cannot be read from one without the other.

The National Register was established by federal law in 1966 with the stipulation that it include properties of local and state significance as well as those of national importance. This reflected a growing recognition that many historic properties that were important principally to their own communities were being cleared for urban renewal. People were losing those buildings and neighborhoods that provided their own personal, daily identity and sense of history. Buildings that have significance for the nation as a whole, such as Mount Vernon, are eli-

gible for the special designation of National Historic Landmark.

For a property to be eligible for the Register, it must meet at least one of the following four criteria:

1. Be associated with events or developments--these are properties that contributed to the broad patterns of history, such as industrial, educational and transportation facilities.

2. Be associated with historically significant persons--these properties are often the homes of people who had a lasting impact on local, state or national history.

3. Be of architectural significance--this category covers buildings that represent a specific building type, date from a specific stylistic period, are good examples of a type of construction, or illustrate the work of a prominent architect, builder, or craftsman.

4. Be potential sources of information--these properties are usually archeological sites but may also include structures possessing information on building technology..

Additional considerations are the building's age and its physical condition. As a rule, a property must be fifty years old before it is considered eligible for the National Register; however, if it is obviously of exceptional significance, it can be listed much earlier. A notable local example is the Saturn V Space Vehicle: its place in history is unquestioned.

Evaluating a property's condition is more difficult; for a building to survive unaltered until its significance is recognized can be a tricky matter. Many buildings undergo repeated alterations to keep them useful

and occupied; without alterations, they are often considered obsolete and then razed. However, to qualify for the Register, a property should not have lost those features that locate it in time and place. Its association with the period of its significance should still be readily apparent. Properties that have been moved from their original site will only be considered if their importance derives from some distinction that was not destroyed by the move.

There are two other types of National Register nominations, besides the individual property and the historic district, that should be mentioned. One is the thematic group nomination, which is a finite group of resources related to one another in a clearly definable way--an example of this might be a nomination for all the extant buildings designed by a prominent architect. The second type is a multiple resource nomination. This is a method of nominating at one time all the individual properties, sites, and historic districts within a specific area. (A multiple resource nomination for the commercial properties of downtown Huntsville is now under review in Washington.) This does not create an historic district; it merely provides for many individual properties and historic districts to be listed with one application.

Listing on the National Register provides formal recognition that the property is of significance and has historic and/or architectural value to the community, and possibly the state and nation. Such listing does not protect it from alterations or from demolition by a private owner. The only direct protection the National Regis-

ter provides is from FEDERALLY funded, licensed or assisted projects. If a property is threatened by such a project, the federal agency involved must allow the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to comment before the project proceeds. This has proved to be a successful deterrent in many cases.

However, there are several tax incentives available to owners who preserve and rehabilitate National Register properties. The Tax Reform Act of 1976 and the Revenue Act of 1978 provide tax advantages for approved rehabilitations of depreciable properties, and the former contains a tax penalty for demolition and new construction. The State of Alabama has created an additional incentive for preservation by providing a property tax reduction of 50% for depreciable properties listed on the Register.

In addition, Register listing makes properties eligible for matching grants-in-aid from the Department of the Interior. These grants are allocated by the states--in Alabama by the Alabama Historical Commission. However several states including Alabama award these grants only to public agencies and non-profit groups, not to individuals.

Listing on the Register implies no federal controls on owners other than those just discussed. However many historic districts do have design controls imposed on them at the local level. These design review boards can be established by city ordinance for the purpose of maintaining the historic character of the neighborhood, but they operate independently of the National Register.

The National Register Office is a part of the newly organized Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (HCERS) of the Department of the Interior. Its programs are administered in each state by a State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) appointed by the governor. In Alabama the state agency charged with overseeing the National Register and other preservation programs is the Alabama Historical Commission in Montgomery. The Huntsville Planning Department works closely with the state Historical Commission staff and can often handle preservation and National Register requests at the local level.

National Register nominations may be initiated by any interested citizen. The completed form is reviewed by the SHPO's staff and by the Historical Commission before it is signed by the SHPO and forwarded to the National Register Office in Washington for final review and listing. *

DESIGN REVIEW/ *continued*

toric and architectural character of the area will be permitted. This encourages people to invest in improving their property in a manner appropriate to a common purpose and plan. In effect, it safeguards the property owner who restores his property because he knows that his neighbor must also meet the same guidelines. Design review protects and enhances a neighborhood by halting construction plans and practices that would prove detrimental to its value. The result is that design review gradually raises the aesthetic and historic qualities of the district--as well as the property values. *