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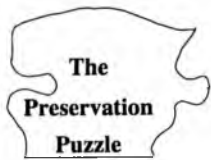
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## **National Register of Historic Places**

by  
Linda Bayer Allen

The National Register of Historic Places is a listing of historic properties in the U.S. and its territories and is composed of individual listings and historic districts. An individual listing may consist of a buildings such as the First Alabama Bank on the Courthouse Square, a structure such as the Redstone Test Stand, an object such as the Saturn V Space Vehicle or the Big Spring, or an archaeological site.

Historic districts are a combination of buildings, spaces and archaeological sites that are important in their totality; although many of the individual components may not qualify for a listing on their own, they play a significant role in establishing the context of the whole ensemble. 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 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 protecting. 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 these 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 eligible 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 archaeological 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 was approved in 1980. This does not create an historic district; it merely provides for many individual properties and historic districts to be listed with one nomination.

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 Register provides is from 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.

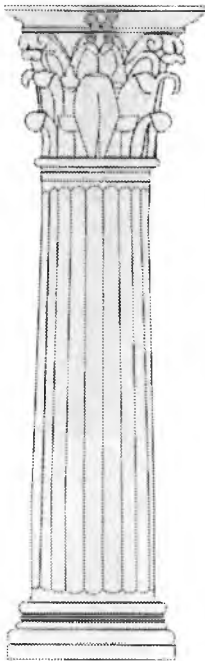
There are several tax incentives available to owners who persevere and rehabilitate National Register code properties. The tax code provides tax advantages for approved rehabilitations of depreciable properties. The State of Alabama has created an additional incentive for preservation by providing a property tax reduction of 50% for depreciable properties listed on the Register.

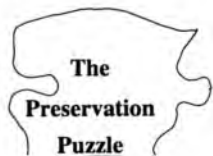
In addition, Register listing makes properties eligible for matching grants-in-aid from the Department of the Interior. These grants are allocated by the states—in Alabama by the Alabama Historical Commission. However, several states including Alabama award these grants only to public agencies and nonprofit 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 are established by local 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 Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (HCRS) 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 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.





## **The Alabama Historical Commission: Heart of the Puzzle**

The Alabama Historical Commission is “every Alabama citizen’s primary resource for protecting and preserving our historical places.” The safeguarding of Alabama’s historical sites and structures is its charge. Created in 1966 by legislative enactment, the Commission is the hub and nerve center of Alabama’s preservation movement. The preservation puzzle would not be complete without SHPO, the State Historical Preservation Office, which coordinates with the national preservation effort and reaches out to local and private preservation groups.

In Huntsville, the Alabama Historical Commission works with city agencies and the Huntsville Historical Preservation Commission to strengthen their efforts and expertise. Through the Certified Local Government (CLG) Program, the AHC offers grants “made available from the Historic Preservation Fund of the National Park Service.” These are matching grants and the Historic Huntsville Foundation is eligible to apply for these through the local preservation officer, Hulan Smith. To date Huntsville has not availed itself of these funds which are especially earmarked for Survey and Registration of historical, architectural, and archaeological resources (\$10,000), for Planning projects “that contain or address a National Register district, are in areas of high development activity [downtown], demonstrate strong community support, and include educational and public participation programs” (\$7,500).

The HHF would be interested also in two other grant areas: Pre-development, for the preparation of architectural plans, specifications, feasibility studies, and historic structure reports (\$5,000); and Public Awareness and Education grants to projects which “increase the public knowledge of preservation principles, promote preservation as an ethic, and that increase knowledge and awareness of the kinds of properties (both historical and archaeological) that are worthy of preservation and the various methods of preserving them” (\$5,000–\$10,000).

The Alabama Historical Commission also provides grants from monies set aside in the Alabama Cultural Resources Preservation Trust Fund. These may be applied for directly to the Commission without sponsorship by the CLG. In addition to the above-stated categories, funds are awarded for Rehabilitation Development and Archaeological Mitigation of existing historic structures, not reconstruction. All projects must follow the “Secretary of Interior Standards.” Applicants must be legal owners to apply. Buildings publicly owned but transferred to private organizations for historic preservation purposes, will be eligible as long as the lease/transfer period covers the duration of the grant. Facade grants are available to local governments and Alabama Main Street Program participants. Grants will NOT be made for privately-owned structures unless they are of national importance. Another criteria for grant selection is eminent danger. Is the structure or site threatened by demolition? Funding is between \$10,000 to \$25,000.

To assist public awareness, the Alabama Historical Commission has established a Historic Endangered Landmark Program or HELP, where properties are listed and attention is directed to their peril. These structures receive funding priority .

The preservation puzzle becomes a real jigsaw puzzle when all the pieces of the Alabama Historical Commission are put together. As the State office of preservation, it is the clearinghouse for all national programs such as the National Trust’s Main Street Program, the exercise of Section 106 Environmental Review to preserve and protect historic landmarks, to review and nominate structures and sites to the National Register, to expand and encourage listings and make nominations to the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage, and to assist with ISTEAs funded projects.

The Alabama Historical Preservation Commission is funded by our tax dollars, grants, trust funds, and contributions. It puts money back in a few of our pockets through its certification of historical income-producing buildings whose owners then become eligible for income tax credits for rehabilitation work. It enriches all of us every day through its extensive promotion of such councils and boards as the Black Heritage Council, the Pilgrimage Council, the Live-in-a-Landmark Council, the Archaeological Council, and the statewide-private-nonprofit Alabama Preservation Alliance.

As if that weren't enough to keep it busy beyond belief, the AHC also owns and must administer historic properties from one end of the state to the other, numbering over 15. Its Executive Director, F. Lawrence Oaks, is supported by an extremely dedicated staff. The HHF has certainly profited from the guidance given it by Robert Gamble, Chief Architectural Historian. This article could not have been written without the aid of Mary Shell and Tara Lanier, editor of the highly informative and essential Preservation Report, published bimonthly.

