

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE



**Historic Preservation in Washington, DC
Frequently Asked Questions**

What are the benefits of historic preservation?

Historic preservation maintains neighborhood character by encouraging controlled growth and helps foster a sense of pride and togetherness among residents. It also makes good economic sense. Rehabilitation of historic buildings is often less expensive than new construction and reinvests more money into the community by utilizing local labor. The protection of community landmarks and historic neighborhoods also preserves tangible representations of local history for future generations.

How many Historic Districts and Landmarks are in D.C.?

There are currently 43 historic districts and more than 26,000 structures designated and listed in the *District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites*. There are 550 DC historic sites and districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

What is the HPRB? What do they regulate?

The D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) oversees and directs the preservation and management of the city's historic resources. During monthly scheduled meetings, the Board reviews applications for projects affecting properties within historic districts. The meetings are typically held on the fourth Thursday of the month and public comment and participation is strongly encouraged. In instances of repairs, in-kind replacements, and many minor alterations, the Board has delegated authority to the DC Historic Preservation Office (HPO) to handle "over-the-counter" sign-offs for permits. The HPO is part of the DC Office of Planning. For more information on HPRB, visit www.preservation.dc.gov.

What types of work must be reviewed by the Historic Preservation Office?

All subdivisions, razes, and exterior alterations proposed to a historic property or in a historic district are subject to historic preservation review. "Exterior alterations" include everything from in-kind repair or replacement of rotted wood to construction of an addition. Interior alterations are not subject to historic preservation review, except for a very few buildings that have interiors designated as historic. Exterior paint colors are not subject to review by HPO or HPRB.

What obligations must I maintain if I live in a historic district?

Besides the permit issues mentioned below, historic designation does not require you to do more than local building codes require. You are under no City or national obligation to open your home to the public or to restore it.

How do neighborhoods in DC become Historic Districts?

Historic districts are established as a result of action taken by neighborhood organizations or preservation groups working together with the community. After careful research and evaluation has

taken place, districts are legally designated by the HPRB and are protected under the Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act of 1978. This law establishes a review process for properties within the districts to ensure that proposed work and/or additions are compatible with the nature of the historic property and with the character of the historic district as a whole. If you are interested in establishing an historic district, contact HPO Community Liaison Patsy Fletcher at 202-442-8827.

What is the National Register of Historic Places? What is the DC Inventory of Historic Sites?

The *National Register of Historic Places* is the nation's official honorary list of cultural resources worthy of preservation. The National Register is authorized under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and is administered by the National Park Service. Nominations to the National Register can be written by anyone but only the State Historic Preservation Officer can forward nominations to the National Park Service (after public comment). If an owner of a private property or a majority of owners in a proposed historic district oppose the nomination, the property will not be listed on the National Register. For information on the National Register, visit www.cr.nps.gov/nr. The State Historic Preservation Officer for DC is David Maloney, who also serves as the Director of the Historic Preservation Office.

The *DC Inventory of Historic Sites* is the official list of historic properties in the city. Sites generally have to be 50 years or older and meet at least one other qualification for significance based on its role in a historical or cultural event, architecture, craftsman, archaeology, or settlement patterns/landscape. Nominations for sites can only come from the owner, HPRB, a public agency, governmental unit, ANC, or preservation organization. Sites listed on the *DC Inventory* are protected under local preservation laws. For information on nominating a site to the DC Inventory, contact the DC HPO at 202-442-8800.

Why did an important building in my community get knocked down or significantly changed even though it's over 50 years old?

Federal and local historic preservation laws can only protect sites and historic districts listed on or formally determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places or the DC Inventory of Historic Sites. Even if a site or neighborhood meets the qualifications for inclusion onto either of these lists, the government has no authority over the impact to these sites until they are formally listed. Even listed sites can sometimes be torn down - but it is a lot harder for someone to knock down a listed building compared to an unlisted one. Community support is the best ally in saving historic community landmarks. Media and community opposition to proposed demolitions have proven extremely successful in protecting both listed and unlisted historic resources. If there is a building or historic site in your community being threatened with demolition, groups like DC Preservation League (DCPL) or local neighborhood preservation groups are available to help.

Are archaeological sites protected under local and national historic preservation laws?

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act ensures that all federal or federally-funded projects be assessed by the Federal Agency for potential impact to historic properties, including standing structures and archaeological resources. If the assessment determines that an archaeological site is considered to be eligible for listing on the National Register, the site can either be avoided or excavated with measures that have been agreed upon by the Agency and State Historic Preservation Officer.

Under the local preservation law, the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board considers the impact to archaeological resources in projects that come before them for review. The HPRB also nominates

archaeological sites to the D.C. Inventory and National Register of Historic Places. Some of the District's archaeological resources date back 8,000 years, and others 100 years. For more information, contact the city archaeologist Ruth Troccoli at the HPO at 202-442-8836.

How can I find out more about the history of my neighborhood or city?

There are many resources available on the history of Washington, DC and its historic districts. The DC HPO has extensive files on many of the local designated or National Register sites in the area. These files are publicly accessible, however you must make an appointment to come in and conduct research. The DC HPO, in conjunction with DCPL, also has brochures available on many historic districts and the DC HPO publishes a free publication: *Researching the History of a Building in Washington, DC*. Other local resources are:

- Historical Society of Washington, DC/ Library
- Martin Luther King Memorial Library
- DC Archives, Office of Public Records
- National Archives
- Library of Congress - Madison Building
 - Prints & Photographs Division
 - Geography & Map Division

How can I find out more about the historic preservation review process and requirements?

The Historic Preservation Office website has more information on the designation and permit review processes, design guidelines, permit application requirements, the preservation law, and preservation regulations. Please see www.preservation.dc.gov or contact the HPO at 202-442-8800.