

What Makes a Property Historic?

To be considered "historic," a property must have three essential attributes: sufficient age, a relatively high degree of physical integrity, and historical significance.

- **Age:** A property must be "old enough" to be considered historic. Generally speaking, this means that a property must be at least 50 years old, although this is just a general rule of thumb. Another way of looking at it is that a property must be old enough to have been studied by historians, architectural historians, or archaeologists so that its place in history is clear. This latter perspective allows some types of properties that are less than 50 years old to be considered "historic."
- **Integrity:** In addition to having sufficient age, a property must retain its historic physical integrity. For a building, structure, landscape feature, historic site, or historic district, this means that the property must be relatively unchanged. Its essential character-defining features relative to its significance must still be present. For an archaeological site, integrity means that the site must be relatively undisturbed, with its patterns and layers of artifacts and other archaeological evidence relatively intact. For a traditional cultural property, integrity means that the site must be recognizable to today's affiliated cultural group, evidenced through tradition, and still used or revered in some way.
- **Significance:** Finally, and most importantly, a property must be significant to be considered historic. Significance is defined in three ways: (1) through direct association with individuals, events, activities, or developments that shaped our history or that reflect important aspects of our history; (2) by embodying the distinctive physical and spatial characteristics of an architectural style or type of building, structure, landscape, or planned environment, or a method of construction, or by embodying high artistic values or fine craftsmanship; or (3) by having the potential to yield information important to our understanding of the past through archaeological, architectural, or other physical investigation and analysis.

How Do We Decide What's Historic?

Each of us may have our own personal opinions about what is historic and what is not. Similarly, different social and cultural groups may have different definitions of "historic." Other interest groups in our society may look at historic properties in entirely different ways or may not value them at all. An important part of historic preservation is establishing public processes to determine what is historic and what is not. Once these determinations have been made, they become public preservation policy. There are several established ways in Georgia of publicly determining whether properties are historic and worthy of being preserved.

- **National Register of Historic Places:** One of the most important ways in which we determine which properties are historic and which are not is through the National Register of Historic Places. Since its creation by an act of Congress in 1966, the National Register has been one of the foundations of historic preservation across the country and in Georgia. It provides uniform standards, a public process, and a national perspective for determining the significance and preservation worthiness of properties. Although the criteria for determining National Register eligibility are essentially unchanged since 1966, their interpretation and application to properties are continuously clarified and updated through published guidance, bulletins, and precedent-setting National Register listings. Listing in the National Register or determining National Register eligibility are among the clearest statements of public policy about what is historic and worthy of being preserved. At the present time there are more than 2,000 Georgia listings in the National Register of Historic Places encompassing more than 75,000 historic properties in the state. Historic properties in Georgia are being added to the National Register at the rate of approximately 25 listings representing nearly 2,000 historic properties per year. Traditionally, Georgia has ranked in the top 10 states in the nation in the number of National Register-listed properties.
- **Georgia Register of Historic Places:** Established in 1989, the Georgia Register of Historic Places is our state's companion to the National Register of Historic Places. Modeled closely after the National Register, the Georgia Register is Georgia's official statewide list of historic properties worthy of being preserved. Properties listed in the National Register are automatically listed in the Georgia Register.
- **Local Designations:** Another important way of determining the significance and preservation worthiness of properties in Georgia is through local landmark or historic district designation. Under the provisions of the Georgia Historic Preservation Act of 1980, local governments can pass ordinances that specify standards and procedures for designating historic properties in their jurisdictions. Criteria and designations may vary from community to community, reflecting local conditions, needs, goals, and prerogatives. At the present time, more than 130 local governments in Georgia have established local historic preservation commissions or have designated local historic landmarks or districts.

- **Section 106 Environmental Reviews:** Federal government agencies are required under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act to take into account the effects of their undertakings on properties that are listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. A national review process established by the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation prescribes the method by which these agencies carry out this legal responsibility. Federal agencies must consult with the state historic preservation office in determining if properties in their project areas are listed in the National Register or might qualify for listing; interested parties and the general public are also invited to comment. This public process identifies hundreds of historic properties each year in Georgia.
- **Planning:** Another way that local communities can define their historic properties is through local comprehensive development plans. As required by the 1989 Georgia Planning Act, local plans must include consideration of historic properties. These plans provide an opportunity for communities to make a public statement about what is locally considered historic and worthy of being preserved. Other local land-use tools, including zoning, sign, and tree ordinances, can be used to delineate or designate historic properties.

How Are Properties Determined To Be Historic?

Although there are several different ways of determining whether properties are historic, all of these processes share three fundamental steps:

- The first step consists of gathering information about a specific property--the facts, so to speak--including a physical description and historical documentation. Maps, plans, and photographs supplement this information.
- The second step involves putting the individual property in its place in history: seeing how it "fits" into the larger scheme of things, documenting what role it played in our history, ascertaining what it might tell us about the past, or determining if it is a good or exceptional example of an architectural style or building type. Useful ways of doing this include comparing and contrasting it to similar properties, to historically related properties, or to other properties in the same vicinity. Another useful way is to determine how the property relates to the distinctive aspects of Georgia's history. Yet another way is to measure how well it retains the character-defining features of its building type or architectural style. Formal studies called "historic contexts" prepared according to National Park Service standards present contextual information by which to determine whether or not a property is historic in especially useful ways.
- The third step consists of applying criteria for evaluation to the property and what is known about it--a yardstick for measuring its significance, so to speak. The National Register of Historic Places "Criteria for Evaluation" or the designation standards found in a local historic preservation ordinance are commonly used to measure the significance of a historic property.
- Each step of the process involves public input and participation along with appropriate professional involvement. Taken together, these three steps constitute the basic methodology for determining the significance of properties.

National Historic Landmarks

A [National Historic Landmark](#) is the nation's highest honor of recognition for historic properties, and fewer than 2,500 properties in the country are designated National Historic Landmarks. [A list of Georgia's NHLs.](#)

Historical Markers

The state historical marker program uses unique criteria and procedures to identify properties of statewide significance. The oldest of the many ways in which historic properties are identified in Georgia, the marker program dates back to the early 1950s. Originally managed by the Georgia Historical Commission, the program currently is administered by the Georgia Historical Society with assistance from the Department of Natural Resources. Through the marker program, former as well as extant historic properties are officially recognized. Currently there are approximately 2,000 state historical markers in Georgia. They are accompanied by uncounted numbers of local and regional historical markers.