

Writing Historic Contexts

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As reiterated in the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation*, "the development of historic contexts is the foundation for decisions about the identification, evaluation, registration and treatment of historic properties, and surveys." Well-developed historic contexts are critical. As you go about the work of researching and writing the themes and contexts, I encourage you to consider the following:

- Historic context statements provide the basis for evaluating significance and integrity. The purpose of the context statement determines how broad or narrow the focus should be. Whether developed for a single property evaluation, a register nomination, or a survey, an adequate and appropriate context needs to be developed before making an evaluation.
- The historic context (statement) is an organizing structure for grouping information about historic properties that share a common theme, place, and time. A historic context focuses on describing those historical development patterns within which the significance of a resource can be understood.
- Historic context statements are a specialized form of historical writing with specific goals and requirements. They are not intended to be a chronological recitation of a community's significant historical events or noteworthy citizens or a comprehensive community history. Nor are they intended to be academic exercises demonstrating prodigious research, the ability to cite a myriad of primary and secondary resources, and write complex and confusing prose comprehensible only to professionals in the field. Rather, historic context statements need to be direct, to the point, and easily understood by the general public.
- Historic context statements are intended to provide an analytical framework for identifying and evaluating resources by providing focusing on and concisely explaining *what* aspects of geography, history and culture significantly shaped the physical development of a community or region's land use patterns and built environment over time, *what* important property types were associated with those developments, *why* they are important, and *what* characteristics they need to have to be considered an important representation of their type and context.
- By focusing on property types rather than on individual buildings or architectural styles, and providing clear criteria for evaluating significance and integrity, a good context provides a template for identifying, evaluating and developing plans for the treatment of historical resources even in the absence of complete

knowledge of individual properties. “Property types” is the concept that links history with the built environment.

- In discussing property types associated with important themes, the context statement needs to answer such questions as:

What facet of history does the property represent?

Why is that facet of history significant?

Is the property type important in illustrating the context?

How does the individual property illustrate that facet of history?

- Information included in historic contexts need to pass the “*so what*” test. When researching or writing, it helps to ask, “So what information does this sentence, paragraph, or section provide to help explain how land use patterns developed or why the built environment looks the way it does today?” Wars, fires, expositions, arrivals of the rail roads and street car lines, visits by presidents, and other such events generally serve as historical markers or frame time periods. But unless a connection is made between that information about what happened in the past and how it shaped today’s built environment, then “so what.” For example, a description of what native peoples ate, wore or made their houses from hundreds of years ago will not pass the “So what” test unless it is connected with *where* they collected or processed their resources and how their land use patterns shaped those of later inhabitants.
- Land use patterns and the built environment are expressions of the ideas and cultural practices of individuals and groups in response to the climate, geography, economy, politics, technology, and available resources in a particular locale. Only when the context writer makes an explicit connection between the history and the extant land use patterns or built environment, will the historic context pass the “so what” test and be a useful tool for integrating historic preservation into land-use planning.
- More information on how to develop context statements is available in *The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation*, and in National Register Bulletins, especially *How to Complete the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form, Historic Residential Suburbs, Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years*, and bulletins focused on evaluating particular property types.