

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION FOR OWNERS OF PROPERTIES NOMINATED FOR DESIGNATION IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

Established in 1955, the Philadelphia Historical Commission is the City of Philadelphia's agency responsible for ensuring the preservation of historically significant buildings, structures, sites, objects, interiors, and districts in Philadelphia. The Historical Commission identifies and designates historic landmarks, listing them on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, an inventory that currently includes more than 26,000 properties. After designation, the Historical Commission collaborates with property owners to ensure the preservation of landmarks through the City's building permit process.

Before the Historical Commission can designate a district as historic, it must determine whether the district has the requisite historical significance to merit designation. To make this determination, the Historical Commission and its advisory Committee on Historic Designation review what is called a nomination, a document that outlines the district's history, explains its significance, and assigns a classification of Significant, Contributing, or Non-contributing to each property. Both the Historical Commission and Committee on Historic Designation conduct their reviews of nominations at public meetings in which property owners and the public may participate. Owners of properties within a proposed district under consideration for designation are notified by letter of the time and place of the public meetings at least 60 days prior to the meetings. The Historical Commission's jurisdiction over all properties in a proposed historic district begins as of the date of that letter. When a property is under the Historical Commission's jurisdiction, it reviews all building permit applications for the property; permits cannot be issued without the Commission's approval. If the Historical Commission votes to establish (or designate) the historic district, its jurisdiction continues; if the Commission declines to designate, its jurisdiction lapses as of the vote.

The City of Philadelphia's historic preservation ordinance requires that owners of properties designated as historic (and those nominated and under consideration for designation) seek and obtain the approval of the Historical Commission and a building permit from the Department of Licenses & Inspections prior to commencing any work that would require a building permit and/or would alter the exterior appearance of the building, site, or permanent site features such as fences or walls. To protect historic properties, the Historical Commission reviews the work proposed in the building permit application to determine whether it satisfies historic preservation standards including the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. The Historical Commission's jurisdiction extends over the entire exterior envelopes of buildings including all facades and roofs, but the Commission concentrates its reviews on facades and roofs that are visible from the public right-of-way. Protecting public views of historic properties is the Historical Commission's primary goal. The Historical Commission is sensitive to time constraints and completes most reviews on the day of submission. More than 90% are completed in five days or less. All reviews must be completed within 60 days. Except in extreme cases of neglect, the Historical Commission cannot require an owner to undertake work to a property, but may only review within the scope of work defined by the owner. Moreover, alterations in place at the time of designation, such as non-historic windows, are grandfathered and may be retained until the owner determines that they need replacement.

The Historical Commission requires reviews for projects including but not limited to:

- construction, alteration, and demolition of buildings and addition to buildings;
- construction, installation, alteration, repair, removal, replacement, or covering of:
 - windows, storm windows, dormers, doors, storm doors, security doors, garage doors, and shutters;
 - exterior light fixtures, window boxes, railings, grilles, grates, and star bolts;
 - porches, steps, stoops, ramps, decks, balconies, and patios;
 - fences, walls, gates, sidewalks, driveways, and parking lots;
 - façades, façade elements, and trim such as cornices and doorways;
 - roofing and flashing;
 - storefront features, signage including awnings and lighting;
 - exterior mechanical equipment, vents, wiring, conduit, pipes, and satellite dishes (except seasonal window air conditioners that require no window alteration);
- masonry cleaning, painting, pointing, repair, replacement, alteration, or removal;
- painting, coating, staining, or sealing surfaces except wood trim and metal trim; and,
- all other projects that would alter the exterior appearance of the building, site, or permanent site features.

Reviews are not required for ordinary maintenance and repair such as scraping and painting wood trim, cleaning gutters, and replacing clear window glass. Also, reviews are not required for gardening, landscaping, tree trimming, or temporary holiday decorations, provided no historic features are altered or removed. Moreover, the Historical Commission has no jurisdiction over the use or ownership of historic properties, but only their appearances.

The Historical Commission recommends that property owners confer with its staff early in the planning stage of any construction or rehabilitation project, especially if the project is complicated. The staff can provide valuable guidance regarding the Historical Commission's processes as well as appropriate preservation techniques. It can also assist property owners in researching the histories of their properties.

The Historical Commission seeks to safeguard the city's unique heritage and wealth of cultural resources as it encourages economic development, promotes healthy and sustainable communities, enhances property values, attracts new residents, businesses, and tourists, provides educational opportunities, and fosters civic pride. The Historical Commission welcomes your participation in the efforts to preserve the Philadelphia's unique, significant, and valuable heritage. Philadelphia's remarkable collection of historic landmarks is one of its greatest resources. Working together, property owners and the Historical Commission can protect and preserve those resources, ensuring a rich future for the city.

If you have any questions about historic preservation or the work of the Historical Commission, please do not hesitate to contact the Commission's staff at preservation@phila.gov or to explore the Commission's website at <http://www.phila.gov/historical>.