

PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

PHILADELPHIA HISTORIC DISTRICTS

What is the Philadelphia Historical Commission?

Established in 1955, the Philadelphia Historical Commission is the City'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 that reflect three centuries of Philadelphia's history and culture. The Commission lists properties on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, an inventory that currently includes more than 23,000 properties. After designation, the Historical Commission collaborates with property owners to ensure the preservation of landmarks through the City's building permit process. The Historical Commission's office is open to the public Monday-Friday, 8:30am to 4:00pm. The Historical Commission's 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.

How is a Philadelphia historic district created?

Before the Historical Commission can designate a district as historic, it must determine whether the district has the historical significance to merit designation. To do so, the Historical Commission and its advisory Committee on Historic Designation review what is called a nomination, a document that outlines the district's history and explains its significance. A nomination may be submitted by anyone, including individuals, community groups, preservation organizations, or the Commission's staff. Both the Historical Commission and Committee on Historic Designation conduct their reviews of nominations at public meetings in which property owners and the public are encouraged to 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.

What advantages does an historic district bring?

The creation of an historic district does not stop change. History, after all, is a continuing process. Rather, designation provides a mechanism to maintain the basic physical and visual character of a district. Many cities, including New Orleans, Charleston, Savannah, New York, Boston and Baltimore, as well as many smaller municipalities in Pennsylvania, have adopted historic districting successfully as parts of their planning, economic development and historic preservation programs. Studies demonstrate that local historic districts contribute to the stabilization of property values, the retention of an area's fabric, and the fostering of community pride.

How does designation protect the character of a district?

The City'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 (L&I) prior to beginning 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). The Commission regulates **only the exterior appearance** of a property. To protect historic properties, the Historical Commission reviews the proposed work 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 as well as sites and site features like fences and walls, but the Commission concentrates its reviews on facades, roofs, and site features that are visible from the public right-of-way. Protecting public views of historic properties is the Historical Commission's primary goal.

What types of work does the Historical Commission review?

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.

How long is the review process for work proposed to a property in a historic district?

The Historical Commission is sensitive to time constraints. The Commission's staff, which approves nearly 95% of all permit applications, is able to complete most reviews on the day of submission. More than 85% are completed in five days or less. Many reviews can be conducted by email. Submission requirements may vary depending on the scope of work, so it is important to contact the Commission's staff early in the planning stage of any construction or rehabilitation project, especially if the project is complicated. More extensive work may require review by the Architectural Committee and approval by the Historical Commission itself, both of which hold public monthly meetings. The Committee consists of architects, a structural engineer, and a builder with knowledge and experience in the appropriate and economic treatment of historic resources. Members of the Historical Commission are appointed by the Mayor, and must include an architect, architectural historian, historian, developer, and representatives of six City agencies.

Can the Philadelphia Historical Commission require the restoration of a building?

No. 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.

Can a building in a historic district be demolished?

Buildings in historic districts are categorized as "significant," "contributing," or "non-contributing." If a building is classified as non-contributing, the Historical Commission's staff can approve its demolition administratively (new construction would still need to be reviewed by the Architectural Committee and Historical Commission). However, to secure a demolition permit for a building listed as contributing or significant, an applicant must prove either that there is no feasible reuse for the building, **or** that demolition is necessary in the public interest. Demolition may also be permitted in instances when the Department of Licenses & Inspections has cited a property as imminently dangerous and has determined that demolition is the only means of safely abating the dangerous condition.

Does the Historical Commission regulate the use of buildings?

No. The Historical Commission has no jurisdiction over the use of historic properties, only their exterior appearance. The Historical Commission encourages the adaptive reuse of buildings.