



Photograph Specifications for National Register Nominations in Michigan

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Preparers of National Register nominations are encouraged to read National Register Bulletin 16A, *How to Complete the National Register Registration Form*, National Register Bulletin 23, *How to Improve the Quality of Photographs for National Register Nominations*, and the 2013 *National Register Photo Policy Factsheet* prior to reading these specifications. All of these documents are available from the National Register of Historic Places website, www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/index.htm.

I. Introduction

Photographs are an integral component of a National Register of Historic Places nomination. Photographs “illustrate the property at the time it was nominated, provide a record of the property's integrity and distinguishing features, and support the nomination's discussion of the property's physical description and historic significance.”

Preparers should bear in mind that by completing a National Register nomination, they are contributing to the public knowledge of our collective history. Additionally, a National Register nomination is a permanent record of the historic buildings and places in our state and our communities and a way to understand the historical development of the places we call home. Even when a property listed in the National Register is demolished or destroyed the nomination remains. For these reasons and more, it is important that nominations include photographs of high quality.

It is with this in mind that this document has been prepared. It does not supplant the requirements described by the National Park Service (NPS), but serves as a supplement, with the purpose of making clear for preparers what the Michigan SHPO requires so that our historic properties are adequately documented and that the nomination process is as efficient as possible.

Additionally, this document is meant for National Register nomination photographs. This means the final set of photographs that are to be submitted as part of a nomination to NPS for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. It does not apply to photographs taken for research or documentation purposes, photographs submitted with the [National Register Preliminary Questionnaire](#), or to photographs taken for historic resource surveys. The SHPO maintains separate instructions for survey photography, and surveyors should read the [Michigan Above Ground Survey Manual](#) before conducting a historic resource survey.

II. What to Photograph and How to do it

National Register Bulletin 23 was last updated in 1998, before the normalization of digital photography and well before the proliferation of smartphones. Yet, this seemingly dated document is a very useful resource for preparers of National Register nominations. That is because though the discussion of film is all but irrelevant, the techniques and aesthetic considerations covered apply regardless of the method and equipment used to visually document a historic property. Likewise, the information about certain types of equipment is applicable to both film and digital cameras.

Please note that a National Register nomination documents a property at the time it is nominated. As such, historical photographs should not be included in the final set of nomination photographs. A limited number of historical photographs and other illustrative aids may be embedded in the narrative sections of the registration form (Sections 7 and 8) to illustrate certain aspects of a property. If you wish to include these types of materials in the registration form, please contact SHPO first.

a. General Advice

It is not necessary to be a professional photographer in order to properly document a historic property. However, the ease, power, and ubiquity of smartphones and digital cameras, in some ways, has fostered a “point-and-shoot” approach to photography. While this is appropriate for some photographs and some occasions, it is not an appropriate approach for documenting a property to be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. Preparers should bear in mind that they are documenting a historic property and that their photographs will be a part of an enduring public record that, in part, tells a story that lasts for years and decades to come. In fact, these photographs will eventually become a tool that future researchers, officials, and property owners use to understand changes to a property or community over time. Please take the time to thoughtfully compose and take photographs that do justice to the property you are nominating and its history. In other words, if a property is worth nominating, it is worth taking thoughtful photographs.

To that end, we recommend photographers spend some time planning their approach to documenting the property. Photographers should consider factors such as the weather, season, day of the week, time of day, position of the sun, human and vehicular traffic, and so forth. Online mapping applications may provide a basic level of information prior to traveling to the property. It is often useful to walk around the property to assess angles, lighting, and potential obstructions. It is also a good idea to walk some distance from the subject property to assess contextual views (see below) and other environmental and topographical factors that may impact your photography, or that may provide optimal views. Photographers may need to return to a property multiple times in order to make use of optimal lighting and conditions.

b. Individual Properties and Complexes

The number of photographs, or views, needed to properly document a property will depend upon the size and complexity of the property and its significance. However, there are aspects of photographing a property that apply no matter the size or complexity. If you have questions about the number of photographs to take, please consult with SHPO staff.

All individual property and complex nominations should include:

- i. Contextual view(s). Such views should show the property in its wider locational setting. Contextual views are similar to streetscape views and should be taken from an appropriate distance so that the subject property is viewed among adjacent and unrelated buildings, objects, structures, and natural features. The subject property should be readily visible.
- ii. Views of various aspects of the property's setting, especially those areas that may be deemed significant to the property, such as historic landscape features. See II.d. *Landscape* below for examples of these features.
- iii. Exterior views that show all elevations of the subject or primary resource, including additions and alterations (corner or perspective views are ok).
- iv. Details of character-defining exterior features (these may be captured in other views, but some materials may warrant separate photographs).
- v. Details of atypical or unusual exterior features.
- vi. Outbuildings, sites, and secondary features, especially those that contribute to the significance of the property or are described in the narrative text.
- vii. Views of construction materials (these may be captured in other views, but some materials may warrant separate photographs)
- viii. Views of primary interior spaces on each floor (i.e. lobbies, vestibules, corridors, meeting rooms, offices).
- ix. Views of primary common or public spaces.
- x. Views of character-defining, atypical, or unusual interior features (i.e. decorative glass, decorative tile, fireplaces, light fixtures, stairs, floors, built-in features, woodwork).

c. Historic Districts

It is not necessary to photograph every resource in a historic district when preparing a National Register nomination (however, every resource should be photographed when conducting a survey – see the SHPO survey manual for more information on survey photography). Rather, nomination photographs for a historic district should adequately capture the essence of the district. Nomination photographs for historic districts should include:

- i. All general areas of the district. No areas, even those with a high concentration of non-contributing resources, should be neglected
- ii. Streetscapes
- iii. Significant or character-defining views, especially those that are described in the narrative text

- iv. Primary or pivotal resources (buildings, sites, structures, objects, designed landscapes, etc.)
- v. Examples of architectural styles – both high style and vernacular – and building forms represented in the district
- vi. Examples of atypical architectural styles and building forms
- vii. Examples of non-contributing resources
- viii. Significant topographical and landscape features that contribute to the character of the district, especially if these are historic features and described in the narrative text
- ix. Aerial (drone or otherwise) or oblique views are welcome, as available, but are not required
- x. Other character-defining, atypical, or unusual features, especially if described in the narrative text

d. Landscapes

Landscapes may necessitate certain photographic documentation not listed below. The SHPO advises preparers to contact SHPO staff with any questions they may have in regard to documenting properties involving landscapes. Preparers should review the National Register bulletins [*How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes*](#) and [*Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes*](#) for guidance on identifying landscape features. Preparers should, at a minimum, provide:

- i. Views of all significant features
- ii. Representative views of all characteristic features
- iii. Views of any buildings, structures, or clusters of above-ground features
- iv. Views of historic pathways or circulation systems
- v. Views of known or potential archaeological resources
- vi. Views of alterations and intrusions
- vii. Views of changes in boundaries (from historical to current)
- viii. Aerial (drone or otherwise) or oblique views are welcome, as available, but are not mandatory

e. Archaeological Properties

Archaeological properties may necessitate certain photographic documentation not listed below. Preparers should review the National Register bulletin [*Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Archeological Properties*](#) for guidance on identifying landscape features. The SHPO advises preparers to contact SHPO staff with any questions they may have in regard to documenting archaeological properties.

- i. Views of the physical environment and configuration of the site
- ii. Views of excavations
- iii. Views of stratification
- iv. Views of artifacts in context
- v. Views of any removed artifacts
- vi. Views of the physical environment and configuration of the site

- vii. Aerial (drone or otherwise) or oblique views are welcome, as available, but are not mandatory

f. Other Property Types

For those property types not addressed in the foregoing text, preparers should review any National Register bulletin related to the property type. National Register bulletins are found under the *Guidance* tab of the National Register of Historic Places website, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/index.htm>.

III. Number of Photographs

- a. NPS guidance states that preparers should submit “at least one” view of an individual property. However, one view will, in all likelihood, never suffice. Plan for several photographs for an individual property, and more for a district. The number of photographs will depend upon the complexity of the property, the number of resources within the property, and to some extent the physical size of the property.

IV. Photo Log

- a. All photograph file names (e.g. “MI_Midland County_Johnson Building_0001”) must be included in the Photo Log in the nomination form along with the required NPS information, as found in the *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. The file name must follow the NPS format for digital National Register photographs. Please see section VII.d below for more information.

V. Ordering Photographs

- a. The order in which photographs are presented is key to understanding a property. Photographs should be placed in a rational order, from largest to smallest or broadest to narrowest, and, in the case of an individual property, exterior to interior. This means that the photographs of an individual property should begin with contextual views and end with interior views. The order of the photographs should generally follow the description of the property: general views, specific elevation views, interior views, or, in the case of a district, streetscape views followed by individual resources. Photographs for historic districts should generally follow the inventory found in Section 7.

VI. Photo Key

- a. Photographs for complexes, historic districts, landscapes, archaeological properties, and large sites must be keyed to a map with the direction and number of each view indicated. The number of the photo must correspond to the number in the Photo Log, as noted in IV above.
- b. Photographs for single properties should include a photo key that identifies photographs taken on each floor of the property.

- c. It is highly recommended that preparers reference the particular photograph(s) using an in-text citation when describing views or features of the property in the narrative portions of the nomination that have been documented in the nomination photographs. For example:

“...hipped gable roof (Photo 0013).”

“... a small, non-historic shed situated atop a rise in grade (Photo 0027).”

VII. Technical Requirements

The SHPO requires that preparers submit digital photographs that meet or exceed the “best” specifications of the NPS 2013 *National Register Photo Policy Factsheet*. Additional information is provided below. Please note that most, if not all, modern digital cameras will exceed the “best” requirement. If a digital camera has adjustable quality settings, please set the camera to the highest available setting. Photographs should not be altered in any way.

a. Image Size (Dimensions)

The 2013 factsheet states that the *preferred* or “best” photograph size required by NPS is 2,000 by 3,000 pixels. While this is currently the size *preferred* by NPS, **this is the minimum size required for each final nomination photograph submitted to the SHPO.** Smaller images will not be accepted. Any modern digital camera should meet that requirement without difficulty. It is recommended that preparers set their cameras to the highest available setting prior to taking nomination photographs. In many cases this will not be an issue, but we suggest taking a few practice photographs before photographing the subject property to ensure you obtain the best image and to avoid retaking photographs.

On Windows PCs, dimensions can be found by right-clicking on an image file and selecting the “Details” tab, or viewing the file information in the “Details pane” in Windows Explorer.

Please do not alter, crop, or resize the digital photographs. Submit the original file only.

b. File Format

The 2013 NPS factsheet specifies that nomination photographs must be submitted to NPS in TIFF format.

If your camera produces TIFF or RAW images, then submit those, unaltered, to SHPO.

If your camera produces only JPEG images, then set the image quality to the highest setting prior to taking nomination photographs and submit those files to SHPO. SHPO staff will convert them to TIFF format prior to submitting the nomination.

c. Submitting Photographs

All nomination materials – nomination forms, photographs, maps, research materials, and so forth may be submitted on one CD or DVD or a flash drive (also called a thumb or USB drive). Do not submit printed photographs.

Please note that media on which nomination materials are submitted will not be returned and become the property of SHPO. Likewise, all photographs submitted with a National Register nomination become public documents and may be used by SHPO or the public at any time. Please do not submit any photographs that property owner does not want to be available for public use or that you do not have permission to use.

d. Digital File Naming Convention

Digital nomination photograph file names must contain four components:

1. the two-digit state code,
2. county name (including “County”),
3. property name, and
4. the number of the photograph in the sequence.

All nomination photographs must follow the NPS file format:

MI_County Name_Property Name_0001

Properties with long names may be truncated. For example, photographs for the “Shrine of the Black Madonna of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church,” for example, may be entered as:

MI_Wayne County_Shrine of the Black Madonna_0001

Note that the number suffix must include four digits. The file name must contain underscores (“_”) between each component of the file name. Photographs with file names that do not conform to the NPS standard will be returned for revision.

Photograph file names must include “County” in addition to the name of the county. For readability, the file name must contain spaces between the county name and the word “County” and between each word of the property name.

For example, do not enter the file name as:

MI_BayCounty_CenterAvenueHistoricDistrict_0001

Instead, the file name must be entered as:

MI_Bay County_Center Avenue Historic District_0001

VIII. Other Considerations

- a. Please respect copyright. Historical photographs that are not owned by the preparer or that the preparer has not received permission to duplicate should not be embedded in the registration form. If you have received permission from an individual or institution, please include a copy of that permission with your nomination materials.
- b. Please do not submit photographs protected by copyright unless you have received permission from the photographer, owner, or copyright holder to do so. If you have received permission, please include a copy of that permission with your nomination materials.
- c. Please do not submit Google Street View images or other images from mapping websites. They are **not** acceptable for nomination photographs and will be removed. Aerial or satellite imagery from mapping applications may be used to create maps for National Register nominations, however.
- d. Please do not submit any other screen capture images. They are **not** acceptable for nomination photographs and will be removed.
- e. Please do not submit photographs of historical documents, maps, or other research materials. These are not acceptable nomination photographs and will be removed. However, such materials may be submitted as supporting documentation.
- f. Please do not submit photographs of photographs or other similar materials as nomination photographs.
- g. Please take your photographs in proper conditions. Poor photographs will not be accepted and will be returned for revision. Examples of such photographs include subject properties or resources that are:
 - i. Obstructed
 - ii. Blurry or unfocused
 - iii. Obscured by foliage, rain, snow, or fog
 - iv. Washed out
 - v. Unbalanced
 - vi. Poorly lit (e.g. a photograph taken at night)
 - vii. Poorly composed

Please see Appendix A for illustrations of these problems.

Additionally, photographs in which the subject of the photograph is unclear will be returned. In other words, if we cannot tell what we are looking at or which property is the subject property, the photograph will be returned.


IX. Use of National Register Photographs

By submitting a photograph to SHPO to be included in a National Register nomination, the photographer or preparer acknowledges that each photograph is entered into the public domain and may be reused by SHPO, NPS, and other entities and individuals.

Appendix A – Some Common Problems with Photographs

In the tables below are photographs that illustrate common problems as seen by SHPO staff. The accompanying text explains the issues in each photo. Some photographs will or could fall into multiple categories, but are presented only once.

Obstructions

	<p>This is a fine photograph of a tree, but the façade of this house is significantly obscured. A better view would be had by moving to the left for a three-quarters view. In this case, it may also be good to take a second façade photograph from the right.</p>
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The construction equipment located in front of this building is unavoidable, but the roof and dashboard of the automobile from which the photograph was taken surely are. The dome of the State Capitol has been cut off by the roof of the car as well. To the extent possible, National Register photographs should not be taken from an automobile, and especially not through a windshield. Views of this building could be safely taken from the corner that is visible at right in this photograph. That said, safety is a paramount concern. Photographers should not place themselves in unsafe conditions or circumstances when documenting a property.

Note, too, the black car in the middle of the road. To the extent possible, wait for traffic to pass before taking the photograph.

Perspective and Composition



Photographing tall buildings in a confined space presents special challenges. Without the proper equipment, photographs may look like this. The angle of the view is poor and a portion of the building is not visible. A better view could likely be had by moving to the opposite side of the street and some distance from the building.

Lighting can be a challenge as well. Photographers should take care to plan their work at the time of day in which light is optimal. Repeat visits may aid in obtaining a property illuminated view.



This photograph, taken on what appears to be a beautiful day, suffers from poor composition. National Register photographs should be taken at normal angles and provide views of the subject property as it normally stands.



The deep blue sky and wispy clouds are a beautiful backdrop and the green grass and trees are a nice textural contrast to the limestone façade of this building. However, perspective and composition are the problems with this photograph. This photograph would benefit from being taken from a different location – centered with the building and back some distance. A three-quarter view from the both right and left would also be useful views.



In this photograph, the backs of the pedestrians are more readily ascertained than the facades of the buildings. It may be difficult to photograph these buildings at any angle due to the trees, cars, and people. In this case, it would be better to wait until early spring or fall, when the leaves have fallen, and take the photographs on a day and at a time when fewer cars and people are present.



The deep blue sky provides a nice contrast to the asphalt. The seam and sealant in the asphalt works to draw the eye inward. However, the right side of the street is heavily shaded, and this photograph would benefit by a landscape orientation, rather than a portrait orientation. Changing the orientation would also reduce the prominence of the sky and asphalt. As it is, the buildings are visually subordinate in this photograph.

Lighting and Exposure



This photograph is too dark to be useful. Daylight appears sufficient, so this is likely an exposure problem. Be sure to check the settings of your camera and adjust as necessary. Backlit or poorly exposed photographs seldom provide the details necessary to understand a property.



The roof of this walkway dominates this photograph, and the rear portion of the building is overexposed. Taking additional views from other locations and positions, and adjusting the exposure settings of the camera, would likely produce an acceptable photograph. Additionally, the subject of the photograph is unclear. This is likely not a useful view for a National Register nomination.

Visual Clutter



This otherwise fine view of a downtown commercial district is marred by the clutter of cars and street furniture. This photograph would be improved by returning at a time when less traffic is present. Returning at a time when the sky is less overcast would also contribute to an improved photograph.



This view would be improved by returning at a time of year when the leaves are not present. This photograph would also benefit from better lighting or exposure.



This otherwise fine photograph would benefit by taking care to omit the street light from the view. Stepping forward (though not into traffic!) or to the left should do the trick.