



SURVEY AND DESIGNATION # 1 | AUGUST 2021 | MICHIGAN.GOV/SHPO

## Historic Resource Surveys: The Basics

All successful preservation activities start with a basic understanding of what you have—the location, character, condition, and significance of historic places in your community. This understanding is developed over time through historic resource surveys, which gather information on properties in your community and document them to a consistent standard. Through the survey, you answer basic questions about the history and character of each property and the overall area, which helps you to better plan for, preserve, and tell the story of important places in your community.

### Why is Survey Important?

Survey is fundamental to historic preservation. When we understand the sites important to the heritage of our communities, we are better equipped to effectively plan for them as part of local planning and development processes. We are also better able to collaborate with stakeholders and have meaningful conversations about place, heritage stewardship and local identity, and their role in community and economic development. Among other things, the information gathered through survey helps:

- CLGs prioritize preservation projects for technical assistance, grant applications, and local funding;
- Planners develop land use policy and promote responsible decision-making;
- Property owners and developers seek designation for properties, which enables use of historic preservation tax credits and other incentives;
- Historic district commissions (HDCs) make informed decisions about the character of local historic districts;
- Community organizations develop heritage tourism and educational programming; and
- Everyone promote awareness of and appreciation for the community's heritage and historic places.

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### Do surveys only include buildings?

Buildings are just one part of a survey. Depending on your project area and goals, you may also find it important to include structures, sites, objects, districts, landscapes, and/or archaeological sites in your survey.

#### How old does something have to be for survey?

It depends on your goals. Some surveys identify all properties in an area regardless of their age. Others focus on resources of a certain age, typically 50 years, which is a common baseline for considering a property “historic” for programs like the National Register of Historic Places. Generally, communities are encouraged to include resources 40 years of age or older to provide longevity to the results, which are important for local planning.

#### Do surveys access private property?

Unless a project is being completed in coordination with a property owner and they have given permission to be on private property, community surveys are limited to taking photos and notes from the public right-of-way, such as the road, sidewalk, or alley.

#### Who completes historic resource surveys?

Surveys can be completed in various ways. Some communities complete surveys through municipal staff and volunteers while others find benefit in hiring a preservation professional to complete the survey. Communities are encouraged to brainstorm potential survey options with SHPO.

#### Is funding available for surveys?

Yes! CLG communities have access to exclusive grant opportunities through SHPO. Every year, SHPO makes money available to CLGs to fund various types of preservation activities, including historic resource surveys. Additional information on the CLG grant program is available at [www.michigan.gov/CLGgrants](http://www.michigan.gov/CLGgrants).

## Choosing the Right Tool: Reconnaissance and Intensive-Level Surveys

Historic resource surveys can be categorized as either **reconnaissance-level** or **intensive-level**, which refer to the level of detail captured on each property as part of the survey. Because each type of survey is best suited for certain goals and particular situations, it is a good idea to proactively think through your project to determine which type of survey will best meet your needs. This will help you make the most of your time and money before jumping into a project.

The table below provides a quick comparison of reconnaissance and intensive-level surveys. For more detailed information, check out SHPO's **Michigan Above-Ground Survey Manual** available at [www.michigan.gov/SHPO](http://www.michigan.gov/SHPO).

Reconnaissance-level Survey		Intensive-level Survey
<p>Reconnaissance or “recon” survey is a first step used by communities to plan for and prioritize future activities. It is a “quick look” at properties to document their basic character and conditions. Recon survey is most useful when you have never systematically looked at an area and you want to determine if a property or group of properties is worthy of detailed study.</p>	<p><b>What is the purpose of the survey?</b></p>	<p>Intensive-level survey is a more comprehensive approach to survey. It is a slower moving activity that includes detailed documentation and research of properties to determine their significance and integrity. Intensive-level survey is typically used when properties are being seriously considered for local historic district designation or nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.</p>
<p>Recon survey is best suited for broad areas where you want to cover a lot of properties and get a basic understanding of their general character, conditions, and historical associations. For example, a community might survey a particular corridor or cluster of neighborhoods to gather basic data on all properties, which can then be used to prioritize future study of individual areas.</p>	<p><b>When should the survey be used?</b></p>	<p>Because intensive-level survey involves a thorough look at properties and is intended to inform specific planning decisions, it is best suited for individual resources and well-defined groups of properties that are related to one another by historical development patterns (e.g., a downtown commercial area or a specific neighborhood) or theme (e.g., mid-century bank buildings or nineteenth century farmsteads).</p>
<p>Because reconnaissance-level survey is only a first step, it does not include detailed research on individual properties. Instead, the survey focuses on documentation of each property’s physical characteristics (e.g., architecture) through digital photography and brief analysis. This is combined with basic research to identify the broad trends and development patterns associated with the overall study area. Research for individual properties is limited to readily available information such as published histories.</p>	<p><b>What activities are included in the survey?</b></p>	<p>Intensive-level survey places a balanced focus on both physical documentation and detailed research. Comprehensive photographic documentation and analysis of individual properties are complemented by archival research on the study area and each surveyed property. The collected research is used to document the events, trends, patterns, and persons that shaped the development and evolution of the area. It is also used to identify how individual properties in the study area relate to the identified themes, patterns, and events.</p>
<p>The results of a reconnaissance-level survey are documented in a written report that summarizes the history, development patterns, and characteristics of the overall study area. The report also includes a basic analysis of surveyed properties and their relationship to identified development patterns. This is complemented by maps, photographs, and SHPO inventory forms. A key component of the report is a section that provides recommendations for potential National Register eligibility and future preservation activities, including planning priorities, public outreach and educational opportunities, and intensive-level surveys.</p>	<p><b>What type of documentation is produced as part of the survey?</b></p>	<p>An intensive-level survey results in a written report that includes detailed study of the historical themes and development patterns associated with the study area. Thorough analysis of individual properties—including their character, significance, and relationship to the overall study area—is key to the findings. Maps, photographs, and SHPO inventory forms are required report components. Broad planning recommendations can be made, but the report must also include specific recommendations regarding each property’s eligibility for listing in the National Register of Historic Places and/or designation as a local historic district.</p>



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