



# Photograph Requirements for National Register Nominations in Michigan

*Updated November 30, 2023*

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](#) along with reading these specifications. These documents are available from the National Register of Historic Places website, [www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/index.htm).

## Introduction

Photographs are an integral component of a National Register of Historic Places nomination. As written in Bulletin 23, 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 an enduring record of the historic places in our state and our communities and provide 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 significantly altered the nomination remains. For these reasons and more, it is important that nominations include photographs of high quality and provide an honest representation of the property.

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 both the National Park Service (NPS) and 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 of Historic Places 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 taking photographs as part of a historic resource survey.

## 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 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 alike.

Please note that a National Register nomination documents a property at the time it is nominated. As such, historical photographs are not included in the final set of nomination photographs but may accompany the nomination as figures. 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), or included in an appendix, to illustrate certain aspects of a property. If you wish to include these types of materials in the registration form, please contact SHPO first.

## 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 National Register 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 keep 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. These photographs will 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.

Lastly, photographers should keep in mind that the set of photographs submitted as part of a nomination should provide a visual tour of the property. The photographs should convey to someone who may never visit the property those qualities that give the property significance.

### **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 photographs that provide:

1. 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.
2. 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 the *Landscapes* section below for examples of these features.
3. Outbuildings, sites, and secondary features, especially those that contribute to the significance of the property or are described in the narrative text.
4. Relationships between resources (contributing and noncontributing).
5. Exterior views that show all elevations of the subject or primary resource, including additions and alterations (corner or perspective views are ok).

6. Details of character-defining, atypical, or unusual exterior features (these may be captured in other views, but some materials may warrant separate photographs).
7. Views of primary, common, or public interior spaces on each floor
  - a. For public buildings: lobbies, vestibules, corridors, meeting rooms, offices, stairs, etc.
  - b. For residential buildings: entries, halls, stairs, living or family rooms, kitchens, entertaining spaces, bedrooms, bathrooms, etc.
8. Views of character-defining, atypical, or unusual interior features (i.e. decorative glass, decorative tile, fireplaces, light fixtures, stairs, floors, built-in features, woodwork).
9. Views of construction materials (these may be captured in other views, but some materials may warrant separate photographs)

## Historic Districts

While it is not necessary to photograph every resource in a historic district when preparing a National Register nomination, it is important to be methodical when documenting a historic district (please note: every resource should be photographed when conducting a historic resource survey. See the SHPO survey manual for more information on survey photography). Nomination photographs for a historic district should adequately capture the essence of the district. Photographs should also be presented in a rational order. This could be alphabetical (Ash Street, Elm Street Oak Street, Spruce Street, etc.), or directional (all north-south oriented streets in order from north to south, followed by all east-west orient streets in order from east to west).

Nomination photographs for historic districts must include:

1. All general areas within the district boundaries. No areas, even those with a high number of non-contributing resources, should be neglected.
2. Streetscapes
3. Significant or character-defining views, especially those that are described in the narrative text
4. Primary or pivotal resources (buildings, sites, structures, objects, designed landscapes, etc.)
5. Examples of architectural styles – both high style and vernacular – and building forms represented in the district
6. Examples of atypical architectural styles and building forms
7. Examples of non-contributing resources
8. Significant topographical and landscape features that contribute to the *character* (as opposed to significance) of the district, especially if these are historic features and described in the narrative text

9. Aerial (drone or otherwise) or oblique views are welcome, as available, but are not required
10. Other character-defining, atypical, or unusual features, especially if described in the narrative text

## 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:

1. Views of all significant features
2. Representative views of all characteristic features
3. Views of any buildings, structures, or clusters of above-ground features
4. Views of historic pathways or circulation systems
5. Views of known or potential archaeological resources
6. Views of alterations and intrusions
7. Views of changes in boundaries (from historical to current)
8. Aerial (drone or otherwise) or oblique views are welcome, as available, but are not mandatory

## 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 regarding documenting archaeological properties.

1. Views of the physical environment and configuration of the site
2. Views of excavations
3. Views of stratification
4. Views of artifacts in context
5. Views of any removed artifacts
6. Views of the physical environment and configuration of the site
7. Aerial (drone or otherwise) or oblique views are welcome, as available, but are not mandatory

## 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>.

## Number of Photographs

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

## Photo Log

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 the *Technical Requirements* section that follows for more information.

## Ordering Photographs

The order in which photographs are presented is key to understanding a property. Photographs should be placed in a rational order, from broadest to narrowest. The set of photographs should provide a visual tour through the property, whether an individual building, a site, or a historic district.

In the case of an individual property, exterior to interior. This means that the photographs of an individual property should begin with contextual views, the proceed to exterior views, and continue with interior views, generally. 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. The photographs should be presented in a rational order. This could be alphabetical (Ash Street, Elm Street Oak Street, Spruce Street, etc.), or



directional (all north-south oriented streets in order from north to south, followed by all east-west orient streets in order from east to west).

## Photo Key

1. 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.
2. Photographs for single properties should include a photo key that identifies photographs taken on each floor of the property.
3. It is highly recommended that preparers reference the particular photograph(s) using an in-text reference 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:
  - a. "...hipped gable roof (Photo 0013)."
  - b. "... a small, non-historic shed situated atop a rise in grade (Photo 0027)."

Note: in-text photograph references do not constitute an in-text citation, as addressed in the *Michigan State Historic Preservation Office Style Guide* and should be made as described here.

## 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.

### 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.

### **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.

### **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 the property owner does not want to be available for public use or that you do not have permission to use.



## 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. Do not abbreviate "County" to "Co." 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*

## Other Considerations

- Please use caution when taking photographs. Getting the right shot is important, but you are infinitely more so. Please be aware of your surroundings; watch for cars and environmental hazards; take a colleague or buddy, as needed; wear protective gear (like hard hats)

when entering unknown buildings; and be sure to communicate with the appropriate individuals regarding where you will be and when.

- Please respect private property rights. Photographs should be taken from the public right-of-way unless you have explicit permission from the owner to enter private property.
- Please communicate with local communities (city officials, local police department, etc.) when photographing historic districts. A letter of introduction from the project sponsor and visible identification may be useful, depending on the project and circumstances.
- Please respect copyright. 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, a copy of that permission must be included with your nomination materials.
- Please do not submit historical photographs as nomination photographs. Nomination photographs must be current views. Historical photographs of the property and its resources may be submitted as figures.
- Please do not submit historical photographs of people unless the property is significant under Criterion B. In that case, historical photographs of the significant person(s) may be submitted as figures.
- Historical photographs that are not owned by the preparer or that the preparer has not received permission to duplicate must not be embedded in the registration form or included as an addendum or attachment. If you have received permission from an individual or institution, a copy of that permission must be included with your nomination materials.
- Please do not submit Google Street View images or other images from mapping websites. They are not acceptable nomination photographs and will be removed. Aerial or satellite imagery from mapping applications may be used to create maps for National Register nominations, however. Please see [Map Requirements for National Register Nominations in Michigan](#) for more information on preparing maps for National Register nominations in Michigan.
- Please do not submit any other screen capture images. They are **not** acceptable for nomination photographs and will be removed.
- 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.
- Please do not submit photographs of photographs or other similar materials as nomination photographs.
- 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: obstructed; blurry or unfocused; obscured by foliage, rain, snow, or fog; washed out;

unbalanced; poorly lit (e.g. a photograph taken at night); poorly composed.

- 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.

Please see Appendix A for illustrations of common problems.


## **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 EXAMPLES OF PROBLEMATIC PHOTOGRAPHS

What follows are photographs that illustrate common problems with National Register photographs as seen by SHPO staff. The accompanying text explains the issues in each photo. Some photographs may fall into multiple categories but are presented only once.

### Obstructions

	<p>The façade of this house and some of its details are obscured by the large tree. 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 three-quarters view 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 building 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 so that photographs are taken at the time of day in which light is optimal. Repeat visits may aid in obtaining a property illuminated view.





This photograph suffers from poor composition. National Register photographs should be taken at normal angles and provide views of the subject property or resource as it normally stands.



The deep blue sky, wispy clouds, and green grass and trees are a nice contrast to the limestone façade of this building. Perspective and composition are the problems with this photograph, however. A better view could be had by moving to the left so as to be centered with the building and moving back some distance. A three-quarter view from the right and left may also be a good approach.





In this photograph, the facades of the buildings are difficult to see. 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 on a day and at a time when fewer cars and people are present.



The buildings in this downtown are difficult to see. The right side of the street is heavily shaded. The buildings are visually subordinate in this photograph, too. A better approach would be to photograph each side of the street separately. This photograph would also benefit from a landscape (horizontal) orientation, rather than a portrait (vertical) orientation.

## Lighting and Exposure



This photograph is too dark to be useful. This is either an exposure or lighting 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. Returning on a different day or at a different time may improve results too.



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.

## Visual Obstructions



This otherwise fine view of a section of a downtown commercial district is affected by the visual obstructions of cars and street furniture. This photograph would be improved by returning on a day and at a time when fewer cars are present.



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.

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Find additional information and guidance at:  
[www.michigan.gov/nrhp](http://www.michigan.gov/nrhp)