SOME THOUGHTS ON HISTORIC RESOURCE SURVEYS

A historic resource survey is an important first step in preservation planning. Surveys identify and document historically and/or architecturally significant buildings and other resources (such as cemeteries, monuments, or bridges) in order to foster a community’s pride in its heritage, prepare for landmark designation, provide incentive for revitalization of historic resources, promote heritage tourism, and expedite legal review of federal or state-assisted projects. Some surveys seek to document all significant resources in a particular geographic area; others are organized around themes such as a particular property type, architectural style, or historic event. The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) establishes standards for two types of surveys: reconnaissance-level and intensive-level surveys.

A reconnaissance-level survey focuses on establishing the historic context of a community through research and observation, and on preliminary identification of significant properties. Historic contexts are themes in a community’s history that shaped its physical and architectural character. For example, the importance of 19th-century Erie Canal-related industry and commerce is reflected in many communities’ building stock.

Armed with knowledge of important historical themes, the survey team conducts field work to identify the types and prevalence of historic resources present in the community. The goal is to compile an overview rather than spend a lot of time documenting any individual resource (hence the common term “windshield survey,” as this work is sometimes done from a car). The team identifies and records basic information about properties that appear to meet the criteria for significance. A typical final report includes a narrative account of the survey area’s historical development and important themes, accompanied by an annotated property list and recommendations for further study.

An intensive-level survey is a more in-depth study, often used to prepare for National Register and/or local landmark designations. In addition to more detailed research on community history, the survey team carries out property-specific research and field work to document those properties that appear to meet designation criteria. The resulting report includes a historical overview and a detailed description of each significant property with a narrative recording its history and significance.

Funding the Survey - Municipal governments and not-for-profit organizations are eligible to apply for grants from the Preservation League of New York State’s Preserve New York program and/or the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation’s Certified Local Government (CLG) program to help fund survey projects. These two programs have application deadlines once a year.
Using the Survey - A completed survey is a valuable tool that can generate tremendous goodwill on behalf of historic resources and preservation planning efforts. Communities should consider taking advantage of this momentum by seeking press coverage, sponsoring lectures and tours featuring properties identified in the survey, and initiating National Register and/or local landmark nominations. The survey report should be housed in municipal offices and the public library, and consulted regularly when land-use decisions are made.

Identification in a survey reflects a considered judgment that a property rises above the ordinary and merits special attention. The survey itself does not legally regulate what owners may do with their properties. Such protection and restrictions come only with local landmark designation, a separate process.

Private owners and developers find surveys helpful in making preliminary decisions concerning development or redevelopment of properties because significance of individual properties to the community is clarified for both the developer and municipal authorities before any applications are made for permits. Having this information available in advance, before anyone has invested their time and resources in a project, can reduce uncertainty and the risk of eleventh-hour controversy.