

From the

LOUISIANA

State Historic Preservation Office

Office of Cultural Development,
Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism

Historic Districts 101

By Patricia L. Duncan
Division of Historic Preservation

Historic districts are an important part of the nation's historic preservation program. However, even preservation professionals and city planners can become confused over the types of districts, what they do and what they don't do. Local and National Register historic districts are like fraternal twins — they share many similarities but have important differences.

A historic district is an area of contiguous resources (sites, buildings, structures or objects) united historically or aesthetically by plan or physical development. Districts come in all sizes and shapes. They can be residential, commercial, industrial, or rural in nature.



Winnsboro Commercial District, Franklin Parish

Photo by Patricia L. Duncan



Carrollton Residential Historic District, Orleans Parish

Photo by Donna Fricker



McNutt Rural Historic District, Rapides Parish

Photo by Donna Fricker



Cinclare Sugar Mill Industrial Historic District, West Baton Rouge Parish

Photo by Donna Fricker

Local & National Districts

Photo courtesy of Louisiana Main Street



In Louisiana, two authorities can create historic districts and this is why the confusion arises.

Local historic district commissions, authorized by the state constitution, designate areas within their communities. The constitution allows these commissions to choose their own eligibility requirements and level of regulation. (For example, they often approve or deny requests for demolitions and sometimes review proposed changes to buildings.) However, these operating decisions must be endorsed by municipal officials and codified in local ordinances. There are at least 64 local historic districts in Louisiana. Pictured above is Bastrop's locally designated historic district in Morehouse Parish.

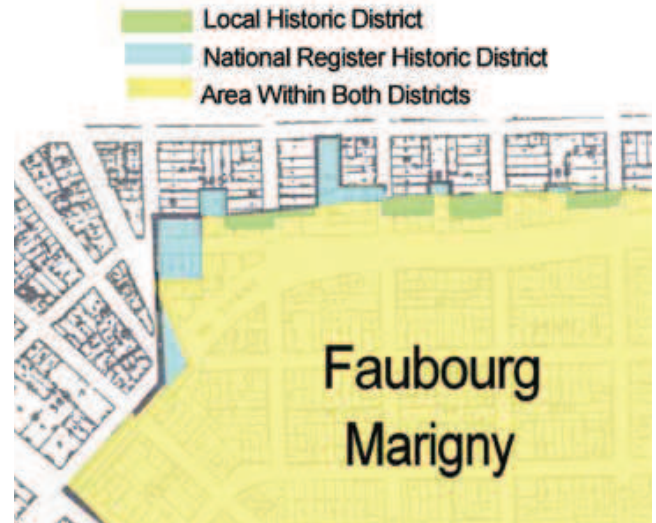


Photo by Donna Fricker

The National Register of Historic Places, authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, can designate districts anywhere within the state. The federal law requires the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the National Park Service (NPS) to co-administer the program and provides specific eligibility requirements for candidates. The National Register is not regulatory. A private property owner can do whatever he wishes with his Register-listed property as long as he observes local laws. As of this writing, Louisiana has 92 National Register historic districts and designation of another is pending. Several communities have more than one. Pictured above is Shreveport's Downtown Commercial Historic District, one of several National Register districts in the city.

For more information about National Register historic districts, see page 10 of the February 2006 and page 7 of the April 2005 issues of *Preservation in Print* by going to www.prcno.org and searching the publication's digital archives. You are also welcome to call the SHPO's National Register Coordinator at 225.219.4595. For information on established local districts, contact the municipality's zoning or planning department. For advice on establishing a local historic district commission, contact Jessica Golebiowski with the SHPO's Certified Local Government program at 225.219.9771.

Questions of Boundaries



Graphic by Patricia L. Duncan

The question of boundary definition is perhaps the most confusing issue associated with historic districts. Local historic district commissions can choose their own rules for establishing boundaries, but the National Register must follow National Park Service guidelines. Although an area's boundaries at a specific time in history can be considered, visual barriers, visual changes in the character of the area, and clearly differentiated patterns of historical development are far more likely to impact Register boundary choices. Even when the SHPO and a local commission agree that an area should be designated as historic, the boundaries of the local and Register districts may vary due to their different selection criteria. New Orleans' Faubourg Marigny is a good example of a historic district with different local and National Register boundaries. In one corner of the district, the local boundary follows straight lines while the National Register boundary meanders around those lines. Pictured above is a portion of the Faubourg Marigny Historic District in Orleans Parish.

Contributing Elements



Photo by Donna Fricker

The presence of a resource within the boundaries of a National Register district does not guarantee it a place on the Register. Each must be evaluated to determine if it has the age, importance and integrity (ability to reflect its importance) to qualify. Resources lacking these essentials are called non-contributing elements or intrusions. For example, in a district designated due to its age and architectural merit, a modern building constructed on a vacant lot in 1990 and a greatly altered historic building would both be non-contributing. Contributing elements are those that meet the age, importance and integrity qualifications. All contributing elements within National Register historic districts are eligible for the same benefits as individually listed properties. Despite its location within the boundaries of the Downtown Baton Rouge Historic District, the second building from the left in this picture above is not included on the National Register because of its modern roof addition.