

From the

# LOUISIANA

State Historic Preservation Office

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

## National Register 101

### Historic Contexts

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WHEN WE TELL National Register applicants that their candidates must be significant within related historic contexts, they generally do not know what we mean as this is a term rarely heard outside of the academic world. So why should preservationists care about historic contexts?

Historic contexts are the center of the circle around which evaluating and proving the significance of National Register candidates turn. As discussed in the February 2011 issue of *Preservation in Print*, a candidate must meet three criteria to qualify for National Register listing: age (a minimum of 50 years), integrity (survival of historic character) and significance (importance). To determine if a resource meets the Register's significance requirement, the candidate must be evaluated within its appropriate historic context. A

resource or event is always part of a larger environment or circumstance.

But what, more specifically, is a historic context? In the National Register world, the term is used in three ways.

**Definition One:** According to Nation Park Service language, "Historic contexts are those patterns, themes or trends in history by which a specific occurrence, property or site is understood and its meaning . . . (or significance) within . . . history is made clear." Historic contexts provide the background necessary to understand why candidates may be important. A resource relates to a historic context through its associations, uses or activities that occurred there.

Contexts can apply to significance at the local, state or national level. They can address design (art, architectural styles, landscape



Photo by Donna Fricker

**Rice Boom and Midwestern Immigration:** Rice cultivation did much to develop Louisiana's Southwestern prairies. Property types for this historic context include rice mills, rice paddy irrigation pumping stations, and mid-western type "Victorian" residences like the Funk House, above, in Jennings.

architecture and engineering) as well as archaeology and history. Contexts can also be organized around geographical areas and time frames as well as themes. For example, "The Queen Anne Revival Style Houses of Opelousas" is a context, as it focuses upon an architectural style within a specific locale, that the State Historic Preservation Office would like to see developed. Louisiana's French Creole architecture is an important, long-recognized state-level context. The lumber industry is a context under which Louisiana candidates have qualified for Register listing at the local, state and national levels of significance. Each state has a unique set of historic contexts that explain how and why its history and culture developed as they did. Additionally, residents of specific areas may be knowledgeable about local contexts of which the SHPO is unaware.

**Definition Two:** A historic context is a document that identifies and explains in detail those patterns, themes and trends that apply within the state. These documents help the SHPO evaluate National Register eligibility by describing the types of properties associated with each context, the physical characteristics of those properties and which of these are required for eligibility, and the locations where these properties are likely to be found. Finally, they provide guidance on the evaluation of property integrity. (For a discus-

sion of integrity, see the March and April 2011 issues of *Preservation in Print*.) Contexts can also assist city planning officials in deciding which local resources should be preserved. These admittedly complicated documents are usually prepared by historic preservation professionals.

**Definition Three:** A historic context is a required component of a National Register nomination narrative. The narrative is shorter and less detailed than the write-up described in Definition Two and is tailored to the candidate being nominated. It contains a history of the resource's community, summarizes the trend or theme to which the resource relates, explains how the resource reflects or illustrates that theme and compares the candidate to other resources associated with the theme. If significance is being claimed under more than one context, both must be developed in separate sections of the narrative. For example, a school might be eligible under Criterion A: Theme or Event, for its role in the coming of age of education in a community. It may also be a candidate under Criterion C: Design, because it is one of that town's architectural landmarks. (The National Register eligibility criteria are explained in the February 2011 issue of *Preservation in Print*.)

Unfortunately, contexts do not exist to cover every resource type that may be Register-eligible. When Louisiana began nominating buildings for



Photo by Donna Fricker

**Anglo American Architecture:** This historic context covers the entire state and includes all examples of architectural styles except the French Creole. Property types include commercial, institutional, religious, and governmental buildings as well as residences. The Slattery House, above, is in Shreveport.



Photo by Donna Fricker

**Transportation Systems:** This historic context covers the role of the steamboat, railroad, automobile and airplane in Louisiana's development. Its wide range of property types includes light houses, steamboats, steamboat warehouses, steamboat town centers, and locks; automobile dealerships, early filling stations and motels, diners, and parking garages; airports, terminals, hangers, and runways; streetcars; and railroad roundhouses, warehouses, hotels, and depots like that in Hammond.

historical rather than architectural context, it opened the door to many types of cases for which no contexts were available. When no written context exists to guide in the preparation of a nomination's significance narrative, the nominator has to develop it. Banking and education are examples of abbreviated contexts the Division of Historic Preservation has prepared for past successful nominations. Once a narrative has been written, it can often be reused with only minor adjustments when similar candidates are nominated to the Register.

Although the need to write a historic context for a National Register nomination may seem more like a barrier than a help to the citizen applicant, the precedent is well founded. Historians have been evaluating events and people within

their historic contexts since at least the 18th century.

Some of Louisiana's historic contexts are illustrated by the photographs accompanying this article. Others will be illustrated in the next installment of National Register 101, which will also address how to evaluate a candidate within its historic context. In the meantime, additional information is available in National Register Bulletins 15, 16A and 16B, all of which can be found on the National Park Service website: <http://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/>. Historic contexts in National Register nominations can be found in the Division of Historic Preservation's online National Register database at: <http://www.crt.state.la.us/hp/nationalregister/historic-placesdatabase.aspx>.



Photo by Patricia L. Duncan

**Historic Lumber Industry:** Property types related to this statewide historic context include sawmills; company towns, headquarters and commissaries; company-built workers' housing and churches; and equipment. The Clyde Log Skidder (built in 1919) at the Southern Forest Heritage Museum in Rapides Parish is believed to be the last surviving skidder anywhere.

"In the National Register program, historic contexts include three elements: a historical theme, geographical area and chronological period. Historic contexts describe the impact of various historic themes, trends or patterns on areas as small as part of a community or as large as the nation. The property type analysis occupies the middle ground between the general historic context and the individual property. At the most specific level, the National Register Registration Form illustrates how an individual property or historic district relates to the historic contexts, represents a property type and meets registration requirements for the type."

Source: National Register Bulletin 16B: How to Complete the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form



Photo by Donna Fricker

**French Creole Architecture:** Creole architecture is found in southern Louisiana, New Orleans, and Natchitoches Parish. Property types include Creole town houses, raised plantation houses, and cottages; poteaux en terre and piece sur piece houses; above ground cemeteries; and pigeonniers like those at Parlange (above) in Point Coupee Parish.