The Components of a Historic Context

A National Register White Paper
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This paper is not intended to replace information in the National Register Bulletins and other NPS publications. It is intended as a supplement, and if discrepancies are found between this paper and other NPS publications, the existing publications should be considered correct. Comments are welcome and should be directed to the author. After review and discussion, the substance of this paper may be incorporated into future publications.

Introduction

The evaluation of properties for National Register eligibility involves an assessment of the significance of a property in terms of the history of the relevant geographical area, the history of associated historical themes or subjects, and within an historical and contemporary time frame—in other words, its *context.* The purpose of this paper is to provide general guidance on writing a context. It is intended to pertain to all nominations and property types, regardless of the applicable criteria.

More explicit information on developing historic contexts for special property types is included in the National Register bulletins. For example, the bulletin on historic aviation properties gives instructions on addressing the contexts important to those properties. This paper, therefore, provides general information, with the understanding that the person developing a context will need to add his or her mark of creativity and solid research for a context to be a good tool for evaluating related properties.

The applicability of this information to archeological resources may be somewhat limited. For these resources, detailed instructions can be found in the National Register Bulletin *Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Archeological Properties.*

Historic Contexts and the Multiple Property Documentation Form

Historic contexts may have been developed for National Register Multiple Property Documentation Forms (MPDF), for statewide historic preservation plans, or for local planning initiatives. Some contexts may be nearly fully developed in individual National Register nominations or in published or manuscript histories. However, for a context to apply to a particular nomination, it must be included in that nomination or a listed Multiple Property Documentation Form must be referenced. The context in a listed MPDF should not be repeated in related nominations, although salient aspects should be summarized. Because the MPDF is considered the model for context development, this paper may seem like instructions for that form. In fact, individual nominations not related to an MPDF should contain a context that is essentially a microcosm of an MPDF context.

Format

Historic contexts should be considered a summary document, not a thesis. They should present relevant information, and avoid extraneous information. The author needs to evaluate what is relevant and understand that mere *length* does not lend credence to a subject.

The National Register considers conventions of *The Chicago Manual of Style* (most recent edition) appropriate for all work that pertains to its programs, including context development. To that end, and to emphasize the accuracy required of a context, some information should be cited using footnotes or text citations. The following *Chicago* statement regarding the use of notes pertains to National Register contexts:

> Ethics, copyright laws, and courtesy to readers require authors to identify the sources of direct quotations and of any facts or opinions not generally known or easily checked (2003, 594).

Components of a Context

Every historic context must include the sections discussed below.

Statement of Context. Begin the context with a summary statement that identifies the areas of significance or themes, time periods, and geographic areas that are encompassed by the context. Explain why the context pertains to local, state, or national history. Details will be explored in the sections that follow.

Background History. Present a brief overview of the history of the geographic area encompassed by the context, with a focus on its relationship to the nominated property. If the context pertains to a city or county, provide an overview of the development of the area. If the context pertains to the entire state or the nation, provide sufficient background to set the stage for a detailed description of a particular theme or Area of Significance. For example, if an Area of Significance relates to Ethnic Heritage, information on general settlement of the state may be used as background to settlement by a particular ethnic group.

Definition of the Context. Establish the thematic, temporal, and geographic parameters of the theme or Area of Significance.

> **Theme.** The context may pertain to a particular property type, such as Barns of Linn County, Oregon, or Cast Iron Architecture of Baltimore. The context may be based on the Areas of Significance claimed in a nomination. For example, many downtown historic districts are considered significant for their role in the city's commerce or their architectural qualities. Residential districts may pertain to community planning and development or ethnic heritage. An individual industrial building may pertain to engineering, industry, and invention. Each of these subjects has been identified as an Area of Significance by the National Register.
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> Explain why the theme is significant in the history of the nation, state, or locality. To be significant, the theme should have had some level of influence on American history or culture. The Areas of Significance used for the National Register form reflect many

aspects of American history that have exhibited significant developments, although other Areas of Significance can be defined.

Geographic Parameters. Geographic parameters can be based on a variety of factors. They may be determined by the extent of a survey effort, such as Route 66 through Illinois, or by municipal boundaries, such as Covered Bridges of Frederick County, Maryland, and Religious Architecture in Phoenix. Some contexts are more logically discussed at the state level, because they concern properties that are relatively rare or related to an aspect of state history. Examples include Maine Public Libraries and State Parks in Wisconsin. Other contexts are handled at a statewide level because funding and other resources have been allocated for a large-scale study, such as Historic Highway Bridges of California.

The selected geographic parameters should not be arbitrary. The boundaries must be justified in the context; in some cases, smaller areas require greater explanations. For example, generally the boundaries of a historic district do not constitute sufficient geographic parameters for the context of the Areas of Significance identified in the district nomination. If bungalows and four-square houses contribute to an architecturally significant district, the context needs to explain the manifestation of these house types in the broader neighborhood and city. In some cases, the introduction of a style or the occurrence of an event is explained from a statewide or national perspective, as a means of explaining how it filtered into the city and neighborhood.

Temporal Limits. The temporal limits of a context are generally based on the earliest and latest occurrence of an event, activity, or date of development/construction. For example, one assumes a context called the *Civil War in Virginia* relates to 1861-1865; however, the context could extend to events leading up to the Civil War and events that happened shortly thereafter. If so, the temporal limits should state the year of the earliest event and latest event that are considered within the parameters of the context. The period of significance for a National Register nomination may differ from the period of significance for a historic context, especially if the nomination is related to a MPDF. For example, a historic district may have a period of significance that ranges from 1848 until 1902 (reflecting dates of construction), but the relevant context may range from 1825 to 1925, reflecting the 100-year period that related architectural styles were being built in the city or state.

Development of the Theme or Area of Significance. Address pertinent environmental, economic, cultural, technological, settlement, and governmental factors that may have influenced development of the context. The nature of information presented varies, depending on the geographic scope of the context. This section of the context should be presented as a summary, although if themes are complex, cover a wide geographic range, and extend over a long period of time, the content will be more complex than a theme more limited in all aspects. Suggestions regarding information to include in contexts that are local, state, and national in scope follow.

Local Contexts. For local contexts, describe how and why the theme or Area of Significance developed. Describe the contributions of individuals or groups, and present

factors outside the local area that influenced the theme. For example, technological advances, the completion of transportation networks, the emerging popularity of an architectural style, or a boom in the national economy may have had a direct impact on the local context.

Statewide and National Contexts. For contexts of national or statewide significance, describe how the historical themes generally unfolded in the state or nation. For example, a historic context for Agriculture, but, more specifically, dairying in Wisconsin, could be developed as follows:

- Set the stage by mentioning types of agriculture that preceded the introduction of modern dairying and why their popularity faded;
- Describe environmental conditions and settlement patterns that fostered the development of dairy farms;
- Describe economic factors that influenced dairying;
- Describe ethnic groups that contributed to the development of dairying;
- Explain technological advances that contributed to the success of dairying;
- Describe the influence of government agencies, such as Extension, and the influence of government oversight, such as codes and regulations that pertain to agriculture, commerce, and health;
- Describe how transportation networks influenced the development of dairying.

Associated Property Types. Identify the types of properties that are related to the context and their locational patterns. Property types should be inclusive, reflecting all manifestations, throughout the period and the area encompassed by the theme. All properties acknowledged by the National Register should be addressed: buildings, structures, sites, districts, and objects. For example, properties associated with dairying in Wisconsin may reflect agriculture, as well as transportation, marketing, and technological developments. Therefore, various types of agricultural buildings and landscapes may be associated with dairying, milk and cheese dairies may be related, and facilities at universities where innovations were developed may be associated. Be as specific as possible in identifying property types. In many areas, "dairy barns" is too general to be useful. Instead, the types of dairy barns that were built over time and in specific regions should be identified as property types.

Information about the occurrence and survival of property types should be presented, as well as general impressions about their adaptive uses and condition.

Physical Characteristics and Integrity. Outline and justify the specific physical characteristics each property type must possess to be eligible. Describe the associative qualities that must be evident. Discuss the integrity that must be present.

Relationship to the National Register Criteria. Address the relevance of each of the National Register criteria to the theme and to each property type. Provide guidance through examples in applying the criteria.

Bibliography. The context may distill a great deal of research and field work into a relatively brief document. Because of the summary nature of the documentation, it is essential to include a bibliography of sources consulted in its preparation. The bibliography should not be a "reading list," but sources that are cited in the text or that directly influenced the content of the context.