

WRITING THE HISTORY OF A COMMUNITY

Understanding the history of a community - its development over time - is an important part of historic preservation. A community's history, also called a historical narrative or context statement, is a required part of a historic district National Register nomination. It is also useful when you are conducting field surveys, establishing local preservation designations of historic properties, or preparing local preservation plans. In writing the history, there are a number of topics that should always be addressed.

This outline provides general guidance in writing a community's history. Documentation for the National Register differs depending on the type of property or district being nominated. Remember to focus the community's history on the period of time associated with your nomination, the period of significance (POS). For example, if you are nominating a mid-20th-century residential neighborhood, your historical context should have a brief paragraph or two of early (19th century) history and focus on the history during the 20th century. Conversely, if you are nominating a city such as Augusta that was developed c.1820 through the late 1960s, then you need to focus equally throughout this time period.

The Historic Preservation Division (HPD) staff has prepared a research guide that aids in finding historical records. "Documenting a Property in Georgia" is available at: <https://www.dca.ga.gov/node/6876>

I. Background of the Settlement

Be brief and concise. Focus on the buildings and sites that still exist and their location within the nominated area.

1. **Background** - Write a brief history of the area before the community was created. Mention Native American settlements, early farmers, topography, etc., as appropriate.
2. **Settlement** - When was the region or county officially opened for (White) settlement? Mention the land lottery (if applicable), county creation date, etc. If the county has been subdivided, briefly mention each subsequent division into which this community fell.
3. **Origins of the Early Settlers** - Did they come from Virginia, from Germany, were they part of a group migration, or did they arrive individually?
4. **The Lure** - How were the original settlers drawn to the area? (Land advertisements, etc.)
5. **Reason for the Settlement** - Was the community created because of geographical or transportation advantages? Examples include: the juncture of two rivers (Rome, GA.); railroad intersection (Atlanta); trading spot (Columbus, GA.); a crossroads community.
6. **Name Origin** - Give the origin of the initial name of the community and any subsequent ones. When was the current name first used?

I. Creation of the Community

1. **Date of Settlement** - actual or approximate.
2. **Official Incorporation Date/City Limits** - This information is found in the state laws. Where were the original city limits? How often have they been extended? How does this district relate to them?
3. **Community Plan** - How was the community laid out (grid plan, irregular pattern, etc.)? How did it change over time? Since many districts are often just a subdivision, or a part of a community, comment on how this area relates to the overall town plan. See Joan Sears *The First One Hundred Years of Town Planning in Georgia* (1979). When writing about a planned suburb, be sure to include information about the developer, the exact dates of development, and both the original boundaries and any extensions. Advertisements for a planned suburb can be found in the local newspapers. They provide information about the type of people sought as residents for the suburb, as well as the size of the original development. Plats for subdivided property and planned neighborhoods are often found at the county courthouse in the Clerk of the Superior Courts office.
4. **Community Residents** - Who were involved in the community's settlement and growth, and where were their houses and their businesses located? Do the houses and businesses survive within the district? Remember you are writing a balanced historical overview of the community's history from its creation to the present. In emphasizing the surviving historic houses and commercial buildings, remember to mention people from each era, not just the first or most prominent settlers.
5. **Population** – As the community grew and developed, what kind of people populated it? Did the population change over time? Include historical population statistics of the community over time to show its periods of growth and decline. It is often helpful to compare it to other Georgia towns in the county or general area. The U.S. Census records are located at the State Archives, the University of Georgia, and the National Archives-Southeast Region, as well as at many local public libraries. Sources other than the published U. S. Census Reports are gazetteers, the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, and the R. G. Dun and Co. publications. (See: “Documenting a Property in Georgia” available at: <https://www.dca.ga.gov/node/6876> for where to find these resources.)

II. Ethnic/ Minority /Women’s History

1. **Ethnic** – Was/is there an immigrant or ethnic group population? If so, who were they and where did they live? Are their houses, businesses, churches, schools, etc. still extant in the district?
2. **African Americans** – Most communities in Georgia were segregated until the mid-20th century. Where did the African American residents live before and after segregation in your community? What was the size of the African American population in the community? If the African-American section of the community is not included within the proposed district, explain where it is or was and why it is not being included. Sources of this information include published population totals and censuses, Sanborn maps, city directories, resources at the local historical society, and interviews

with longtime residents. Discuss events related to the Civil Rights era and/or the desegregation of public places, transportation, and educational facilities, as appropriate.

3. **Women's History** – Who were the prominent women in the community? Were there local civic, social, and/or beautification club(s) in the community? Were there locally prominent businesswomen and/or local leaders? Keep in mind that certain 19th century laws prohibited married women from owning property.

III. Economic History

1. **Agriculture** - Was the local economy based upon crops? If so, which ones? Be specific and discuss changes to agriculture in the area over time. If one crop was supreme (e.g. cotton), or was later replaced by another (e.g. soybeans), point this out. Discuss the influence of the boll weevil (destructive force in Georgia from c.1914 through 1924), droughts, floods, or whatever may have severely affected the local economy. Was this a major market town? Did it have a cotton gin and warehouses? Do they or other buildings related to the agricultural economy stillexist?
2. **Industry** - What industries were there? When were they established? Are they in existence? Ifnot, why not? How did industry in the community change over time? What existing buildings relate to those industries? Be specific as to the products. If textiles, be specific as to the exact products, their use, and distribution.
3. **Business** - What were the major local businesses? What kind were they? Where were they located? Do the historic buildings exist? Are any of the businesses still in existence today?

IV. Transportation History

1. **Roads** - Do the roads predate the community? Where did the roads originate and where did they go to? What buildings were associated with these roads, such as gas stations, inns, hotels, motelsetc.? Do not forget modern highway systems, such as the Dixie Highway or the Atlantic CoastalHighway.
2. **Railroads** - Did they predate the town or cause it to be founded? Or did the railroad arrive later, merging into an established community? Give the specific names, both original and later, of all railroads coming through the town and the district. Also, be specific as to their origin and destination. Describe any buildings constructed, such as passenger stations, freight depots, and warehouses and indicate if they survive. Are the railroad tracks still present? If not, when were they removed? When did passenger service stop?
3. **Waterways** - Were there any water-based transportation systems, such as bridges, wharfs, docks,or any other man-made facilities?

V. Military History

1. **Wars** - Which wars have affected the town?
2. **The Civil War** - It lasted only four years, 1861-1865 so do not write too much on this conflict. If any battles took place within the community or nearby, they should be discussed briefly. If the town was burned, or raided in the war, mention and document the specific dates. Mention the community's strategic value to geography, industry, or transportation routes, as appropriate.
3. **Post World War II** – The postwar period was a time of economic growth and a housing boom. Discuss how and where the community housed the returning soldiers. Were new suburbs constructed? New and/or expanded retail operations? How was the commercial core of the town affected?

VI. Cultural/Social Activities

What institutions were established to provide for the enhancement of the community's well-being? Make it clear if the institution you discuss has a historic building which survives in the community and if it is within the proposed district.

1. **Religious Buildings** - Give the specific- faiths, approximate or relative sizes of the congregation, the historic and current name, and the approximate date the existing building was built. Also discuss any historic cemeteries associated with the congregation and whether it is within the district boundary.
2. **Schools** - Remember to include both public and private, African American and White schools. When were they established? Was there an Equalization School in the community?
3. **Libraries** - When were they founded? By whom?
4. **Newspapers** - Give the date the first one was established in the community.
5. **Organizations (membership groups)** - For example, any clubs, such as women's, garden, patriotic (DAR, UDC); or lodges/fraternal organizations (Masons, IOOF, Red Men); also clubhouses, lodge meeting places, etc. and their dates.
6. **Museums** - Is there a museum and when was it opened?
7. **Theaters** - Consider both live entertainment and motion pictures. Give the exact name of the building(s) where these activities took place and an approximation of the date the building was first used for that purpose. Remember to include both opera houses, auditoriums, school auditoriums used for community activities, and motion picture theaters. As a point of reference, the first talking motion picture came to Atlanta in October 1927.

VII. Government Buildings and Government Building Programs

Most communities have one or more important government buildings, such as county courthouses, city halls, jails, etc. In addition, many communities were affected by the New Deal programs, which began in 1933, when Franklin Roosevelt became president. Be careful to record the exact name of the agency which produced the building. The agency names are confusing and often sound the same. For example, the WPA (Works Progress Administration) and PWA (Public Works Administration) are two distinct programs. The most common types of buildings that resulted from these New Deal programs include U.S. Post Offices and federal buildings, schools, recreation buildings, and jails.

VIII. Firsts

Many community histories are greatly enhanced by the addition of specific information about the initial occurrence of certain events in that community. Examples are:

1. **The Telephone** - It was first patented and demonstrated in 1876.
2. **Electricity** - When was it first introduced in the community?
3. **Motion Pictures (Movies)** - When was the first one shown and where was it shown? When was the first "talkie" shown?
4. **Street Paving** - When were the streets first paved and with what kind of paving material?

IX. Special Events/"Red Letter" Dates

Be sure to include anything that was special to your community that might have affected its growth or its history. For example:

1. **Disasters or Weather Events** - Was there ever a snow storm, major tornado, hurricane, flood, fire, and/or other natural or man-made disaster that affected the community's growth or buildings? Were there multiple disasters over time that changed population and/or building and development patterns? Photographs are often taken during these events.
2. **Famous Visitors** - Was the community ever visited by a president, major political candidate, famous orator, or by other historical figures, such as Martin Luther King, Jr.? How did this visit impact the town?
3. **Centennial Events** - Were any held? Where were they held? Was anything built for the event that survives? A good source for information on a town's history is the centennial edition of the local newspaper. This could have been published either on the town's anniversary (75th, 100th, etc.) or on the anniversary of the newspaper's establishment.

4. **Local Events** - Fairs, festivals, celebrations, memorials, outdoor pageants, cake walks, Founder's Day events, community picnics, etc.

X. Landscape Features

Many people often forget that sidewalks and tree-lined streets are not natural creations; they are manmade. Be sure to mention any parks and other landscape features that are within your area and the date(s) of construction or establishment.

XI. Builders and Architects

Include any information you can locate about specific builders and architects who designed and built in your area. If possible, cross-reference to the existing buildings in the district. If the buildings are unknown or are non-extant, you could include just a list from a city directory or gazetteer without any specific building being attributed to them. One could also canvas the census, such as those for 1880, 1900, and 1910, for your community to see if anyone was listed in these occupations. Anyone whose name appears on a building's cornerstone as a builder or architect should also be included.

XII. Recreation and Sports History

Include some information about what people did for recreation and what facilities they might have built. What areas of the community and/or what existing buildings were used for this type of recreation?

XIII. Specific Houses/Buildings

Submit photographs and information about specific houses and buildings within the area, keyed to the text by historic name and street address, to illustrate special examples.

Some of these might be the same places referenced in the description portion of the National Register nomination, but it is important to cross-reference the developmental history with similar examples.

Since a field survey is often completed before a district nomination is attempted, you should reference any previously surveyed historic resources in the area with its GNAHRGIS number. For more information about GNAHRGIS or to search the database visit <http://www.gnahrgis.org>.

XIV. Suburbs

If your community is a suburb, the National Park Service has published two Bulletins on how to document a historic suburb. These are available at: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/publications.htm>

Important as the above information is, a good community history should be more than just a collection of historical facts arranged in chronological order. Once you have all the important historical facts at hand, try to interpret them to bring out the distinctive historical character of your community. For example, is your community a county seat, a crossroads, a trade center, or a suburb of some larger community? Also, try to organize your developmental history by the major factors, trends, or developments that shaped your community's history and by their chronological periods. For example, did the arrival of the railroad or a local industry spur growth and development in your community?

Remember, each community is a special place with a distinctive history.