In an effort to preserve our nation’s architectural legacy, in 1934 the National Park Service formed a working agreement between the public and private sectors through a tripartite agreement with the Library of Congress (LoC) and the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) was thus established to create a public archive of measured drawings, historical and descriptive reports, and large-format black-and-white photographs of historic buildings in all states, the District of Columbia, and the territories of the United States. Although this program was modeled after the prints and photographs division of the Library of Congress, it was not immediately successful. By the mid-1940s, the program was on the verge of being discontinued.

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Throughout the 1970s, the program grew and expanded. In 1979, a decree was issued which mandated that all federal agencies shall, in the preparation of their Federal-Aid Highway Projects, include records in the HABS program. The 1980s saw the beginning of the computer age. Fieldworkers and photographers were introduced to the benefits of handheld computers and digital photography. A comprehensive examination of historic architecture on a national scale and wide uniform standards. The significance of the HABS program resides in the broad scope of the collection and its public accessibility, as well as in the establishment of national standards for recording historical structures. As was noted in the 1933 proposal for the creation of HABS, the collection represents “...a complete resume of the builder’s art,” from the monumental and high style to the vernacular and utilitarian. Priority is also given to endangered structures for which no record would otherwise exist. The HABS records are available to the public copyright-free and on-line through the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress. The program is a resource for architectural historians, restoration architects, preservationists, scholars, and anyone interested in American history and architecture. HABS is also responsible for the development of guidelines for the production of the drawings, photographs, and other documentation and the criteria for preparing them for inclusion in the collection, recognized as the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines for Engineering and Architectural Documentation. According to HABS methodology, the three components of the documentation—drawings, history, and photography—work together to create a comprehensive understanding of the building. Drawings include plans, elevations, sections, and details as well as other characters-defining elements that boost communicative architectural importance and patterns of use. HABS undertakes careful field investigation through a process of hand measuring. In the case of exceptionally large structures, and where accessibility is an issue, hand-measuring is supplemented by the use of three-dimensional laser scanning. Measurements are recorded with pencil on graph paper and augmented by digital photography, and the drawings are then produced using Computer Aided Drafting. Field analysis is supported by primary source research to create a written report that outlines the architectural and historical context in which the structure was developed and later evolved in order to convey its significance. Large-format, black-and-white photographs record texture, details, and spatial relationships with exactitude portrayed by drawings or the written word. They are often supplemented with color photographs, particularly when color is an important feature. Though field work and research are an important part of the HABS process, the documents are not simply a record that is presented at proving just a permanent record, but an approach to the study and understanding of historic structures. Equal to HABS’s concern for the learning potential of its methodology is the need to maintain the quality, reliability, uniformity, and long-term archival sustainability of the records, as mandated by the Secretary’s Standards.

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HABS Partners and Programs

Under the terms of the tripartite agreement, the AIA provides advice and support through the lens of private-sector architectural practice and education, the LoC maintains the collection under state-of-the-art conditions and provides public accessibility, and the NPS (HABS) develops guidelines, field tests new technologies and techniques, and produces standard-setting documentation. While providing no historic designation and carrying no regulatory power beyond mitigation, HABS documentation is used by government agencies, State Historic Preservation Offices, local preservation organizations, and private institutions to rehabilitate, interpret, manage, and promote historic properties. Documentation regularly appears in exhibitions and lineages, magazines, scholarly journals, and in full-length books such as the Norton/Library of Congress Press, Visual Sourcebooks in Architecture, Design & Engineering series.

Today the documentation is produced by a combination of HABS staff working with sponsors, by students, and by professionals either in compliance with Section 106 mitigation or through donations to the collection. HABS works to cooperate with groups in both the public and private sectors to help underpin preservation efforts including rehabilitation, community development, advocacy, and historical interpretation.

In the 1950s, HABS began the summer program that still operates today. Students and professional volunteers gain practical field experience as part of a summer recordation team. Duties include on-site field work and preparation of measured drawings and written historical reports for the HABS collection. Students participate in the annual competition for the best set of drawings to HABS’ standards known as the Charles E. Peterson Prize. The prize honors one of the founders of the HABS program and is intended to increase awareness, knowledge, and appreciation of historic buildings throughout the United States.

For more information about the HABS program, or to access the HABS Guidelines for Drawings, History, or Photography, visit our website at http://www.nps.gov/history/hdp/. Visit HABS/HAER/HALS on Facebook at Facebook.com/HeritageDocumentationPrograms.

The HABS/HAER/HALS Collection is available through the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division via the internet at http://www.loc.gov/pictures/. For more information about the HABS program, or to access the HABS Guidelines for Drawings, History, or Photography, visit our website at http://www.nps.gov/history/hdp/.