

Nantucket Historic District Commission: Background & Objectives

Nantucket Island, along with its sister islands Tuckernuck and Muskeget, is a Historic District¹ designated as National Historic Landmark² (NHL) listed in the National and State Registers of Historic Places. The District retains nationally important examples of architecture from Colonial, Federal, Greek Revival and Victorian periods, and their 20th century counterparts. The National Register of Historic Places lists more than 5,000 Contributing Structures within the District. Comprised of some 30,000 acres it is the largest conventional historic National Historic Landmark District in the contiguous United States.

As a whole and in constituent parts the areas are commonly referred to as the Nantucket Historic District. Within the Nantucket Historic District all areas are of historic consequence and two areas of extraordinary consideration exist; the latter two are i) the Nantucket town core historic district, referred to as the Old Historic District (OHD), and ii) the Siasconset village core historic district, referred to as the Sconset Old Historic District (SOHD).

The built environments of these special lands are afforded certain protections, provided by certain practices:

- Within the entirety of the Nantucket Historic District no building or structure shall be constructed or altered in any way that affects or creates exterior architectural features—unless and until the appropriateness of such construction or alteration is first reviewed and then approved by the Nantucket Historic District Commission (locally, the HDC).
- Property owners become involved with the HDC, directly or through an agent, when they seek to erect, reconstruct, or alter any structure or exterior architectural feature (equipment, component, driveway, landscape architecture, etc.).
- For proposed construction or alteration to be reviewed a properly completed application for an HDC Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) must be submitted. The HDC reviews the application and related information to make a determination subject to the Acts³, and regulations and guidelines⁴, and its common practices.
- An HDC determination will indicate the appropriateness of proposed construction or alterations, including its size, shape and siting, along with any conditions required of approval, or a denial will be issued. Where approval is granted an HDC Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) is issued. Work without an approval is subject to fines and other measures. [Note that HDC approval indicates compliance with its requirements only—approval confers no rights outside of those enumerated within the Acts—it is the sole responsibility of an applicant to determine and secure any other regulatory review and approval (e.g. Conservation Commission, Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, homeowner or condo association, etc.)].

To effect these protections the HDC's Mission, it's charge under the Act, is "to promote the general welfare of the inhabitants of the Town of Nantucket through the preservation and protection of historic buildings, places and districts of historic interest through the development of an appropriate setting for these buildings, places and districts and through the benefits resulting to the economy of Nantucket in developing and maintaining its vacation-travel industry through the promotion of these historic associations." In these matters, the HDC is the sole adjudicatory authority.

Worth noting too, a strong contributor to Nantucket's preservation and related protections is the Nantucket Historical Commission (NHC). The NHC charge is to create plans for the preservation of Nantucket, to advocate through the Town's Select Board on issues of historic preservation, to create educational opportunities, and to oversee state requirements for archaeology. (<https://www.nantucket-ma.gov/439/Nantucket-Historical-Commission>)

¹ Federally, as an NHL, and under Commonwealth of Massachusetts Special Law, Acts 1970 Chapter 395 (as amended).

² Under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (as amended).

³ Nantucket Historic District Commission establishing Acts, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Special Law, Acts 1970 Chapter 395 (as amended). Chapter 395 is a singular act of the Commonwealth predating promulgation of requirements of and for other Massachusetts historic district commissions (Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40C: Historic Districts). Further protection is provided under MA 950 CMR 71.00: Protection of Properties included on the State Register of Historic Places.

⁴ <https://www.nantucket-ma.gov/537/Building-With-Nantucket-In-Mind>