

## Why Hingham Has Historic Districts

Local historic districts are one of the oldest and most effective mechanisms for historic preservation in the United States. Charleston, South Carolina led the way in 1931, to be followed in 1937 by New Orleans and in 1946 by Alexandria, Virginia, famed for the “Old Town” gracing the banks of the Potomac River. Today, more than 2,300 towns and cities throughout the United States have designated local historic districts and enacted provisions for design review.

Like all of these communities, Hingham has recognized that its historic heritage is a unique resource, an irreplaceable legacy to be shared by its citizens and safeguarded for future generations to enjoy. The enduring beauty of the town’s many antique buildings and streetscapes owes a great deal to the efforts of Hingham residents in establishing and administering local historic districts. By maintaining the architectural quality of a neighborhood, an historic district creates a continuing sense of the past. It provides a framework for preserving the distinctive features that form a visible record of our forebears’ way of life.

The charm of Hingham’s historic streetscapes combines authenticity of features, variety of designs, and evolution of styles. Just as the town’s oldest neighborhoods have witnessed the introduction of new styles over the centuries, so the individual houses have in many cases undergone substantial alterations. When sensitive alterations are made to historic homes and other buildings, they can retain their architectural integrity, and new structures can blend well with older ones. As styles change, each becomes “historic” in its turn.

What makes historic districts such a valuable mechanism for preservation is that they not only protect historic properties but also ensure that these properties continue to occupy a meaningful historic context. The designation of an area as an historic district depends on the relationship of historic structures to each other and to their setting. While many buildings within a district may well have unusual merit on their own, even a modest property can hold such interest if it is recognized as a symbol or product of events and patterns in community history. In that sense, the establishment of an historic district creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Historic districts in Hingham have four main functions:

1. To *preserve the unique characteristics* of properties and structures within areas of historic interest;
2. To *maintain and improve the setting* for those structures;
3. To *encourage owners to make new construction compatible in mass, scale and style* with the surrounding architecture; and
4. To *promote community awareness* of Hingham’s architectural and historic heritage.

In pursuing these objectives, Hingham citizens have viewed historic districts as a way of protecting both individual and community interests, rather than as a limitation on property rights. Attention to preservation concerns, whether in remodeling or new construction, can be an owner’s best investment. Indeed, inclusion in an historic district may well enhance the value of a property as the standard of appearance is raised for an entire neighborhood. At the same time, the authority for design review within the districts is carefully defined to promote the general purpose of the By-Law without becoming arbitrary or intrusive. Hingham’s experience with historic districts since 1974 suggests that substantial benefits for the community have been realized.