

The Camera & Clipboard

Historical & Architectural Survey Newsletter



National and State Register Programs
Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation
Colorado Historical Society



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EXTRA! EXTRA!

NATIONAL REGISTER ACCEPTS DIGITAL PHOTOS

NEW POLICY EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY

By Al Means
Affiliated Press

On Friday, March 18th, the National Register of Historic Places issued the long awaited revision to its photography policy. The new policy permits the submission of digital photographs as part of official nominations to the National Register.

The black & white photos must be printed using archival pigments and papers which meet or exceed a 75-year permanence standard. Digital prints must also be accompanied by electronic image files saved as uncompressed .TIF (Tagged Image File format) files on a CD-R media.

Traditional black & white film-generated prints on non-chromogenic papers will still be accepted by the register. However, the rapidly declining use of non-chromogenic papers and the growing use of digital photo processing led the National Register to change its policy.

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OAHP SCRAMBLES TO IMPLEMENT NEW POLICY

By Thaddeus Gearhart
The Camera & Clipboard

The staff of the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation learned unexpectedly of the National Register's new photography policy. "I received an e-mail Friday morning from a colleague stating that she had just seen the policy posted on the National Register's website," stated Dale Heckendorn, National and State Register Coordinator at OAHP. "We hoped the register would have given us some advance notice of its intent to issue the new policy so we could be ready with new forms, instructions, and procedures."

The National Register issued a draft of the new photography policy last fall and asked for public comments. "The comment period closed at the end of December," Heckendorn noted, "so the issuance of a formal policy change just three months later is a quick turnaround."

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POLICY: DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

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The register has a reputation of moving slowly when it comes to policy changes. In the case of photography, the biggest concern has always been with the long-term stability of images. The National Register and its companion program, the National Historic Landmarks, have set as a minimum a demonstrable 75-year standard for the stability of photographic images. The historical documentation related to officially designated historic properties has long-term value to property owners, maintenance specialists, historical researchers, and the public at large.

The key to the longevity of digital prints is the use of stable inks and papers. Most popular printers designed for the amateur photographer do not use the pigmented inks and high quality papers necessary to produce stable prints meeting a 75-year permanence standard.

While the National Register does not endorse any particular commercial product or process, the new policy statement contains a non-comprehensive list of photographic ink and paper combinations that have been demonstrated to meet or exceed a 75-year permanence standard.

The new policy is silent on the long-term stability of the digital files which must accompany the digital prints. Experts continue to debate the stability of digital files on CDs. Recent studies indicate that data may begin to be lost on CDs in as little as five years. There are also questions about constantly changing software and hardware. Will computers in 20 years even be able to read digital files saved with today's technology? Many point to the old 5.25" floppy disks that were once the standard for digital storage and which now are virtually unreadable due to computer hardware changes.

The full text of the new photograph policy is posted on the National Register's website at: <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/policyexpansion.htm>

OAHP: IMPLEMENTATION IN SHORT RUN AND LONG-TERM

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The staff quickly revised its hard copy and web-accessible forms and instructions to accommodate the new policy. The office is ready to begin processing nominations which follow the new digital option. Nominators using the new policy will need to demonstrate that they have used the correct inks and papers in producing their prints.

"That's the tricky part," Heckendorn commented. "It is difficult to look at a digital print and determine what ink and paper were used. Some papers contain identifiable watermarks, but others are more difficult to identify."

Within 60 days, OAHP plans to be able to accept digital files and to print the required photos in-house. This will insure that the correct ink and paper are used. "We already accept the nomination paperwork in digital format, so this will just be an expansion of an existing service." When asked about the anticipated cost of printing photos in-house, Heckendorn admitted that the office would have to consider charging nominators for the printing process. "There will be an initial cost for the purchase of a printer and the associated software. Ongoing costs will include ink and paper. The expense on a nomination for a single property involving a dozen photographs will be relatively small. But a large district nomination may include 50, 100, or even more photos. And we require two sets of all photos—one for the National Register and one for the permanent files at OAHP. For that number of prints we would be incurring a fairly substantial expense. We need to investigate all the costs involved before we make any kind of decision on possible charges for producing digital prints in-house."

The new National Register photography policy raises issues about changes to the State Register program and to OAHP photography policies for historical & architectural survey.

"We certainly don't want to make it more difficult to obtain acceptable photographs for the State

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REVISIONS: STATE REGISTER AND SURVEY NEXT?

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Register than the National Register, "Heckendorn stated. "We will be reexamining the State Register photo standards in the next few weeks and make recommendations for any necessary changes. We will ask for public comments before implementing any revisions to the existing policies." The board of directors of the Colorado Historical Society, as the body officially charged with listing properties in the State Register, will also need to approve any changes to the nomination documentation policies.

In relation to possible changes in the standards for historical & architectural surveys, Mary Therese Anstey, Architectural Survey Coordinator at OAHP, stated, "We realize it has become increasingly difficult to find photo labs to process black and white film. Digital photography has real advantages in terms of ease of use and reduced costs." In relation to historical & architectural survey, staff plans to consider the new National Register standards, consult with members of the Best Practice Committee and develop a workable policy in the near future.



Historical & Architectural Survey OAHP Staff Support

- Mary Therese Anstey
Architectural Survey Coordinator
303-866-4822
marytherese.anstey@chs.state.co.us
- Dale Heckendorn
National & State Register Coordinator
303-866-4681
dale.heckendorn@chs.state.co.us
- Chris Geddes
National and State Register Historian
303-866-4683
chris.geddes@chs.state.co.us
- Holly Wilson
National and State Register Historian
303-866-4684
holly.wilson@chs.state.co.us
- Heather Peterson
Cultural Resource Historian/GIS Specialist
303-866-2680
heather.peterson@chs.state.co.us
- Erika Schneider
Cultural Resource Historian/GIS Specialist
303-866-2656
erika.schneider@chs.state.co.us
- Charlie Martin
Administrative Assistant
(form and report access and copies)
303-866-3395
charles.martiv@chs.state.co.us
- Lovella Learned Kennedy
Archaeological Information Specialist
(source for new site numbers)
303-866-5216
lovella.kennedy@chs.state.co.us

File searches

file.search@chs.state.co.us

COMPASS

compass@chs.state.co.us



Colorado Historical Society
Historical and Architectural Surveys
225 E. 16th Avenue, Suite 950
Denver, CO 80203-1606
www.coloradohistory-oahp.org

