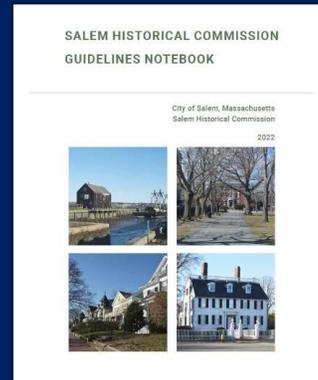


# Exploring Historic District Bylaws, Guidelines and Rules

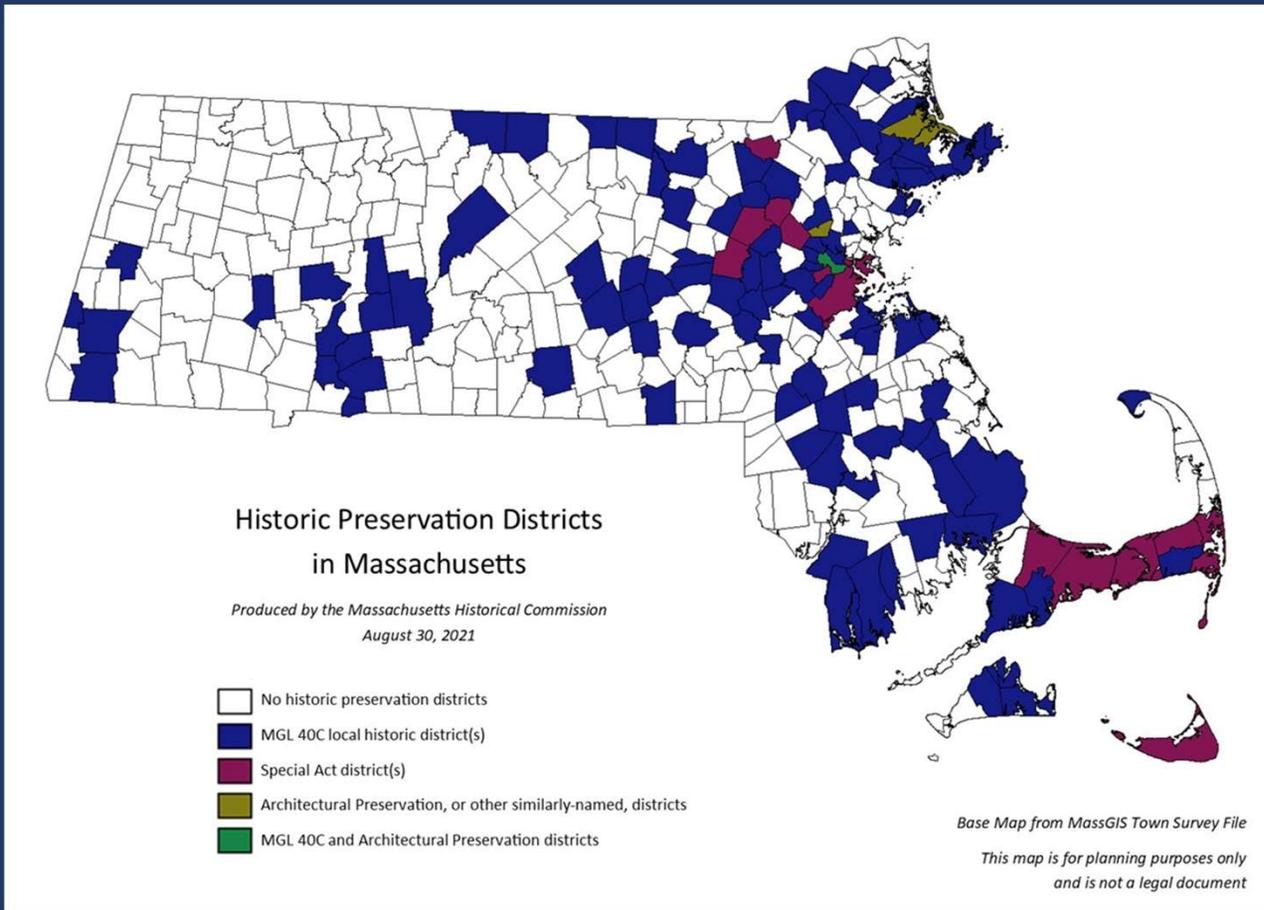
Eastern MA Historical Commissions Coalition Webinar  
October 21, 2025



WILLIAM FRANCIS GALVIN  
SECRETARY OF THE COMMONWEALTH  
CHAIRMAN, MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Massachusetts Historical Commission  
Michael Steinitz  
Director, Preservation Planning Division  
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

# A Brief History of Historic Preservation Frameworks for Massachusetts Local Historic Districts



First local historic districts were established by the cities of Charleston and New Orleans the 1930s.



Charleston Old and Historic District - 1931



Vieux Carre Historic District - 1937

**In Massachusetts, the first local historic districts were established in Boston and Nantucket in 1955.**



**Beacon Hill Historic District - 1955**



**Nantucket Historic District, Old Town & Siasconset - 1955**



## Additional Special Act local historic districts followed:

AN ACT ESTABLISHING AN HISTORIC DISTRICTS COMMISSION *Chap.447*  
FOR THE TOWN OF LEXINGTON AND DEFINING ITS POWERS  
AND DUTIES, AND ESTABLISHING HISTORIC DISTRICTS IN  
THE TOWN OF LEXINGTON.

*Be it enacted, etc., as follows:*

SECTION 1. *Purpose.* — The purpose of this act is to promote the educational, cultural, economic and general welfare of the public through the preservation and protection of historic buildings, places and districts through the de-

**Lexington Historic Districts  
Act – 1956**

**Concord Historic Districts  
Act – 1960**

**Sudbury Historic Districts  
Act– 1963**

**Bedford Historic District Act -  
1964**



**Concord Main Street Historic District**

## 1960 – The Historic Districts Act M.G.L. Chapter 40C

Enables municipalities to establish local historic districts.

Establishes procedures for appointing a study committee and preparing a study report.

Requires 2/3s vote of city council or town mtg.

Sets requirements for historic district commission appointments.

Establishes a process requiring certificates of approval for proposed exterior construction, alteration or demolition in the district.

Creates an avenue for appeals to decisions.

Affirms enforcement powers and sets penalties for violations.

**Chap. 372.** AN ACT TO AUTHORIZE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF HISTORIC DISTRICTS IN THE COMMONWEALTH.

*Be it enacted, etc., as follows:*

The General Laws are hereby amended by inserting after chapter 40B the following chapter:—

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ACTS, 1960. — CHAP. 372.

CHAPTER 40C.

HISTORIC DISTRICTS.

*Section 1.* This chapter shall be known and may be cited as the Historic Districts Act.

*Section 2.* The purpose of this chapter is to promote the educational, cultural, economic and general welfare of the public through the preservation and protection of buildings, sites and districts of historic interest, through the maintenance of such as landmarks in the history of architecture, of the commonwealth and of the nation, and through the development of appropriate settings for such buildings, places and districts.

*Section 3.* A city or town may, by ordinance or by-law adopted by a two-thirds vote of the city council in a city or by a two-thirds vote of a town meeting in a town, establish historic districts subject to the following provisions:—Prior to such establishment, an historic district study committee, established as provided in section four, shall make an investigation and report on the historic significance of the buildings, structures, features, sites or surroundings included in any such proposed historic district and shall transmit copies of its report to the planning board, if any, to the art commission for the common-



**Federal Housing Act of 1954  
funding urban renewal of entire  
neighborhoods.**

**Federal Highway Act of 1956  
funding new highway  
construction through  
neighborhoods.**



**1963 Act establishing the Massachusetts Historical Commission (M.G.L. Chapter 9, Section 26-27c), and enabling cities and towns to establish local historical commissions (M.G.L. Chapter 40, Section 8d).**

**Recognition of the need for state government to have a role in historic preservation.**

**Allow the establishment of municipal-level historical commissions empowered to undertake research, plan, promote, advise other local boards, acquire property.**

**Chap. 697.** AN ACT ESTABLISHING THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION AND AUTHORIZING CITIES AND TOWNS TO ESTABLISH HISTORICAL COMMISSIONS.

*Be it enacted, etc., as follows:*

SECTION 1. Chapter 9 of the General Laws is hereby amended by adding at the end the following two sections: —

*Section 26.* There shall be in the department of the state secretary a Massachusetts historical commission, hereinafter and in section twenty-seven called the commission. Said commission shall consist of the state secretary, or an officer or employee from his department designated by him, who shall be the chairman, the commissioner of natural resources, the commissioner of commerce, two persons to be appointed by the governor, and seven persons to be appointed by the state secretary of whom one shall be selected from a list of three nominees submitted by the Bay State Historical League, one from a list of three nominees submitted by the Massachusetts Historical Society, one from a list of three nominees submitted by The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, one from a list of three nominees submitted by The American Antiquarian Society, one from a list of three nominees submitted by The Trustees of Reservations, one from a list of three nominees

# National Historic Preservation Act 1966

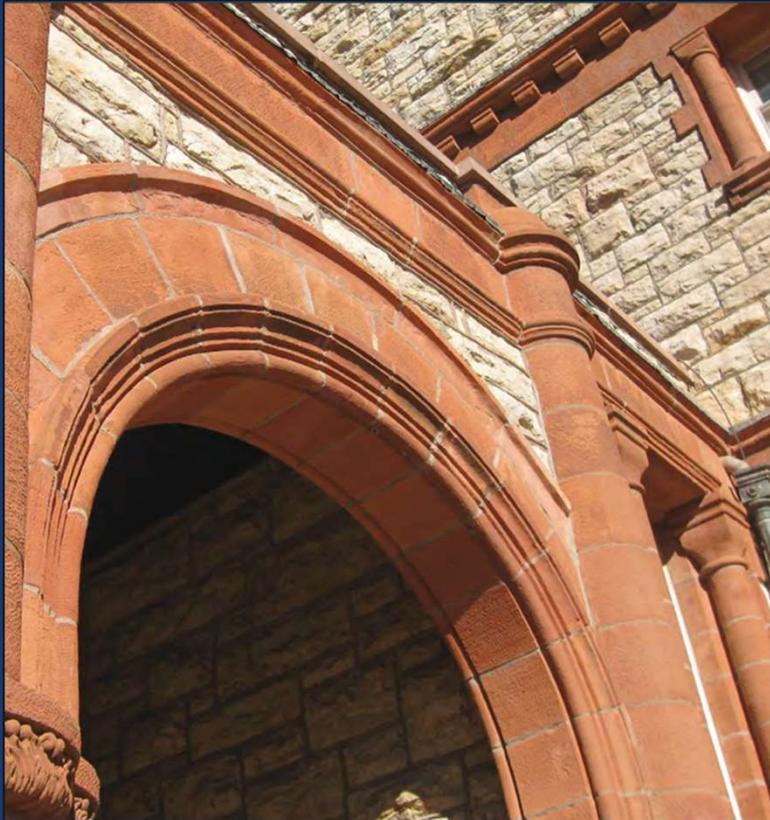
Established the National Register of Historic Places

Created State Historic Preservation Offices

Created the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation

Section 106 requires Federal agencies to consider the potential effects of projects on historic properties and sites and to seek input from the public and other stakeholders.

# The Secretary of the Interior's Standards



THE SECRETARY  
OF THE INTERIOR'S  
**STANDARDS** FOR  
THE TREATMENT  
OF HISTORIC  
PROPERTIES

WITH  
**GUIDELINES** FOR  
PRESERVING,  
REHABILITATING,  
RESTORING &  
RECONSTRUCTING  
HISTORIC  
BUILDINGS



# Additional Standards for Rehabilitation



THE SECRETARY  
OF THE INTERIOR'S  
STANDARDS FOR  
REHABILITATION &

ILLUSTRATED  
GUIDELINES ON  
**SUSTAINABILITY**  
FOR  
REHABILITATING  
HISTORIC  
BUILDINGS



THE SECRETARY  
OF THE INTERIOR'S  
STANDARDS FOR  
REHABILITATION &

GUIDELINES  
ON **FLOOD**  
**ADAPTATION** FOR  
REHABILITATING  
HISTORIC  
BUILDINGS



## M.G.L. Chapter 40C – The Historic Districts Act

### Section 2. Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is to promote the educational, cultural, economic and general welfare of the public through the preservation and protection of the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant in the history of the commonwealth and its cities and towns or their architecture, and through the maintenance and improvement of settings for such buildings and places and the encouragement of design compatible therewith.