

HERITAGE INFORMATION SERIES

ASSESSING HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

A GUIDE TO STATE HERITAGE REGISTER CRITERION A



Heritage Office

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INTRODUCTION

To be listed on the State Heritage Register an item must be significant to the people of NSW and meet at least one of seven criteria. Criterion A is defined as:

A) an item is important in the course, or pattern, of NSW's cultural or natural history.

Amendments to the NSW *Heritage Act* in 1998 established the State Heritage Register and provided for the Heritage Council of NSW to develop criteria for listing on the register. These criteria were published in the NSW *Government Gazette* in April 1999.

Of the seven criteria, two are particularly related to historical values¹. One of these criteria (Criterion A) deals specifically with the importance of an item in the course or pattern of the cultural or natural history of NSW or a local area. An item may be a building, object, place, landscape or other element of the physical environment.

When using Criterion A the course or pattern of history needs to be explicitly identified and assessed. To simply claim that a course or pattern in history exists without providing supporting evidence and analysis will not be accepted by the Heritage Council.

This guideline sets out a broad framework, with illustrative examples, to assist in the investigation and assessment of a claim for significance based wholly or partly on Criterion A, 'important in the course or pattern of history'.

It is critical that a historical pattern or course is established as the historical context for an item (or period in the item's history). This context must be shown to be important or significant.

It is useful to consider the following definitions of terms:

- 'course' as *change over time*;
- 'pattern' as *layers of context from which meanings can be drawn*; and
- 'history' as *a process of research and analysis undertaken by a qualified historian*.

These concepts are embedded within the expression 'the course or pattern of history'.

¹ For information on Criterion B, see *Assessing Historical Association; A Guide to State Heritage Register Criterion B* available on the Heritage Office website.

The role of a qualified historian is widely recognised as being essential in allowing understandings of the historical development of heritage items to be properly researched and interpreted. The guideline for *Community-based Heritage Studies* requires that a professional historian be involved in the process.

To assist in using Criterion A, the Heritage Council has prepared a set of historical themes. The themes are a tool for elucidating the patterns of historical development of New South Wales, and should be used wherever possible.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES AND MATTERS TO CONSIDER

DETERMINING SIGNIFICANCE

When determining the significance of an item, the following principles must be generally considered:

- the item must be able to demonstrate an important aspect or element of a particular theme or themes in the historical development of New South Wales; and
- where the significance is not demonstrated in the *in situ* physical evidence, it may be evident in intangible ways such as recordings, reminiscences and associated objects. There will be some items that rely solely on the intangible for their significance, such as a battlefield or a place name.

CONSIDERING A COURSE OR PATTERN

When analysing the historical course or pattern, the following issues should be considered:

- the concept of change over time needs to be clear in the assessment. Things are not set in aspic, and a sense of time, and of chronology, needs to be considered;
- how the patterns and processes are demonstrated in the fabric of the item needs to be specifically stated. Sometimes this may be demonstrated in documentation or artefacts associated with a place rather than the place itself – ‘the assembled evidence’. This will lead to the question “then why list the place?” – perhaps listing an object or a collection may be more appropriate;
- does the existing structure on a site contain evidence of the most historically significant events on the site? This relates to the capacity of a place to ‘tell a story’, and emphasises the need for adequate research with primary materials (where available);
- have meanings been hidden or obscured by contemporary, visible fabric? This can be the case especially when there is too much focus on the structure alone;
- both natural processes and cultural interpretations for items must be considered within the NSW historical theme, *Environment - naturally evolved* ;
- does the item function as a visual marker to a past that has been disturbed. Items can provide or indicate connections by their landmark qualities;
- some items are iconic, others are ephemeral or more subtle – both are important;
- a visit to the site or object being researched, preferably with the other members of the team, in order to gain an understanding of the physical evidence in relation to the documentary research is strongly recommended wherever feasible.

STATE AND LOCAL LEVELS OF SIGNIFICANCE

All identified items of heritage significance are eligible for listing on a local environmental plan schedule (LEP). Entry on the State Heritage Register (SHR) is reserved for items of state significance.

It must be made clear in any analysis whether an item is significant within the state or local context, or both.

Generally, it will be necessary for a comparative analysis – in which the item is compared with like-items - to be made as part of the historical analysis.

The criteria of 'rarity' and 'representativeness' will also be useful, and should be particularly considered when determining a level of significance.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE & HERITAGE OR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Historical significance is a sub-set of heritage or cultural significance. Historical significance will usually be stated first in a statement of significance, especially if the historical values are the critical values. Holistic or summary statements of significance should only be developed once the statements addressing the relevant criteria have been developed.

The concept of a curtilage (or area associated with an item) is important in determining heritage significance. Historical significance may have an impact upon the definition of a curtilage, as an associated area may be explicit in the historical record, but not visually obvious. This needs to be researched and clearly stated.

MEETING THE CRITERION: THE METHOD

There are six basic steps involved in determining whether an item meets the State Heritage Register threshold through Criterion A, the 'course or pattern of history'. Each of these steps must be addressed in order for a nomination for State Heritage Register listing to be considered.

Step 1

The item must be specifically identified and described, and research questions formulated. Generally, these will be along the lines of 'why was it built? why here? why then?' as well as other interrogatory questions addressing matters such as who, when, what and how.

Step 2

Research the historical development of the item, and prepare a detailed chronological narrative of the item. The narrative can be annotated to indicate important historical patterns, and can be explicitly divided according to discrete periods or phases of time where this will help to understand the item.

Step 3

Drawing upon the detailed chronological narrative, write up thematic summaries that indicate:

- how the identified themes have shaped or influenced the item; or
- how the item has shaped or influences the themes.

Each summary should include some assessment of the ability of the item to demonstrate the theme.

Step 4

Prioritise the thematic summaries according to the ability of the item to demonstrate important aspects or elements of the theme. Clarify what physical elements best demonstrate the theme, and rank these elements for their contribution to the whole item. Then determine a level of significance or contributory value for each element of the item, or for each item making up a group.

Step 5

Write a succinct statement of historical significance, clearly drawn from the thematic conclusions, stating why the item is significant in the course or pattern of cultural or natural history, and clearly stating a level of significance for the whole item or group.

Step 6

If the item does not meet the threshold of state significance, then assess the item using the other State Heritage Register criteria to see whether it can meet one or more of them.

APPENDIX 1: HISTORICAL THEMES



New South Wales Historical Themes

Table showing correlation of national, state and local themes, with annotations and examples

Dated 4 October 2001

Australian Theme	NSW Theme		Notes	Examples
1 Tracing the natural evolution of Australia,	Environment - naturally evolved	Local themes	There are two aspects to this theme: (1) Features occurring naturally in the physical environment which have significance independent of human intervention (2) Features occurring naturally in the physical environment which have shaped or influenced human life and cultures.	A geological formation, fossil site, ecological community, island, soil site, river flats, estuary, mountain range, reef, lake, woodland, seagrass bed, wetland, desert, alps, plain, valley, headland, evidence of flooding, earthquake, bushfire and other natural occurrences.
2 Peopling Australia	Aboriginal cultures and interactions with other cultures	Local themes	Activities associated with maintaining, developing, experiencing and remembering Aboriginal cultural identities and practises, past and present; with demonstrating distinctive ways of life; and with interactions demonstrating race relations.	Place name, camp site, midden, fish trap, trade route, massacre site, shipwreck contact site, missions and institutions, whaling station, pastoral workers camp, timber mill settlement, removed children's home, town reserve, protest site, places relating to self-determination, keeping place, resistance & protest sites, places of segregation, places of indentured labour, places of reconciliation

2 Peopling Australia	Convict	Local themes	Activities relating to incarceration, transport, reform, accommodation and working during the convict period in NSW (1788-1850) – does not include activities associated with the conviction of persons in NSW that are unrelated to the imperial ‘convict system’: use the theme of Law & Order for such activities	Prison, convict shipwreck, convict system document, ticket-of-leave and probationary living quarters, guards uniform, landscapes-of-control, lumber yard, quarry, gallows site, convict-built structure, convict ship arrival site, convict barracks, convict hospital, estate based on convict labour, place of secondary punishment.
2 Peopling Australia	Ethnic influences	Local themes	Activities associated with common cultural traditions and peoples of shared descent, and with exchanges between such traditions and peoples.	Blessing-of-the-fleet site, ethnic community hall, Chinese store, place or object that exhibits an identifiable ethnic background, marriage register, Coat of Arms, olive grove, date palm plantation, citizenship ceremony site, POW camp, register of ship crews, folk festival site, ethnic quarter in a town.
2 Peopling Australia	Migration	Local themes	Activities and processes associated with the resettling of people from one place to another (international, interstate, intrastate) and the impacts of such movements	Migrant hostel, customs hall, border crossing, immigration papers, bus depot, emigrant shipwreck, Aboriginal mission, quarantine station, works based on migrant labour, detention centre.
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Agriculture	Local themes	Activities relating to the cultivation and rearing of plant and animal species, usually for commercial purposes, can include aquaculture	Hay barn, wheat harvester, silo, dairy, rural landscape, plantation, vineyard, farmstead, shelterbelt, silage pit, fencing, plough markings, shed, fish farm, orchard, market garden, piggery, common, irrigation ditch, Aboriginal seasonal picking camp.

3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Commerce	Local themes	Activities relating to buying, selling and exchanging goods and services	Bank, shop, inn, stock exchange, market place, mall, coin collection, consumer wares, bond store, customs house, trade routes, mint, Aboriginal trading places, Aboriginal ration/blanket distribution points, Aboriginal tourism ventures
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Communication	Local themes	Activities relating to the creation and conveyance of information	Post office, telephone exchange, printery, radio studio, newspaper office, telegraph equipment, network of telegraph poles, mail boat shipwreck, track, airstrip, lighthouse, stamp collection.
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Environment - cultural landscape	Local themes	Activities associated with the interactions between humans, human societies and the shaping of their physical surroundings	A landscape type, bushfire fighting equipment, soil conservation structures, national park, nature reserve, market garden, land clearing tools, evidence of Aboriginal land management, avenue of trees, surf beach, fishing spot, plantation, place important in arguments for nature or cultural heritage conservation.
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Events	Local themes	Activities and processes that mark the consequences of natural and cultural occurrences	Monument, photographs, flood marks, memorial, ceremonial costume, honour board, blazed tree, obelisk, camp site, boundary, legislation, place of pilgrimage, places of protest, demonstration, congregation, celebration.
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Exploration	Local themes	Activities associated with making places previously unknown to a cultural group known to them.	Explorers route, marked tree, camp site, explorer's journal, artefacts collected on an expedition, captain's log, surveyor's notebook, mountain pass, water source, Aboriginal trade route, landing site, map.

3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Fishing	Local themes	Activities associated with gathering, producing, distributing, and consuming resources from aquatic environments useful to humans.	Fishing boat, whaling station, marine reserve, fisher camp, seafood factory, fish shop, oyster lease, artificial reef, fishing boat wreck, mooring, dock, marina, wharf, fish farm, fish trap
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Forestry	Local themes	Activities associated with identifying and managing land covered in trees for commercial timber purposes.	Forested area, forest reserve, timber plantation, forestry equipment, saw mill, mill settlement, arboretum, charcoal kiln, coppiced trees, forest regrowth, timber tracks, whim.
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Health	Local themes	Activities associated with preparing and providing medical assistance and/or promoting or maintaining the well being of humans	Hospital, sanatorium, asylum, surgical equipment, ambulance, nurses quarters, medical school, baby clinic, hospital therapy garden, landscaped grounds, herbalist shop, pharmacy, medical consulting rooms.
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Industry	Local themes	Activities associated with the manufacture, production and distribution of goods	Factory, workshop, depot, industrial machinery, timber mill, quarry, private railway or wharf, shipbuilding yard, slipway, blacksmithy, cannery, foundry, kiln, smelter, tannery, brewery, factory office, company records.
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Mining	Local themes	Activities associated with the identification, extraction, processing and distribution of mineral ores, precious stones and other such inorganic substances.	Mine, quarry, race, mining field or landscape, processing plant, manager's office, mineral specimen, mining equipment, mining license, ore laden shipwreck, collier, mine shaft, sluice gate, mineral deposit, slag heap, assay office, water race.

3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Pastoralism	Local themes	Activities associated with the breeding, raising, processing and distribution of livestock for human use	Pastoral station, shearing shed, slaughter yard, stud book, photos of prize-winning stock, homestead, pastoral landscape, common, fencing, grassland, well, water trough, freezer boat shipwreck, wool store.
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Science	Local themes	Activities associated with systematic observations, experiments and processes for the explanation of observable phenomena	Laboratory, experimental equipment, text book, observatory, botanical garden, arboretum, research station, university research reserve, weather station, soil conservation area, fossil site, archaeological research site.
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Technology	Local themes	Activities and processes associated with the knowledge or use of mechanical arts and applied sciences	Computer, telegraph equipment, electric domestic appliances, underwater concrete footings, museum collection, office equipment, Aboriginal places evidencing changes in tool types.
3 Developing local, regional and national economies	Transport	Local themes	Activities associated with the moving of people and goods from one place to another, and systems for the provision of such movements	Railway station, highway, lane, train, ferry, wharf, tickets, carriage, dray, stock route, canal, bridge, footpath, aerodrome, barge, harbour, lighthouse, shipwreck, canal, radar station, toll gate, horse yard, coach stop.
4 Building settlements, towns and cities	Towns, suburbs and villages	Local themes	Activities associated with creating, planning and managing urban functions, landscapes and lifestyles in towns, suburbs and villages	Town plan, streetscape, village reserve, concentrations of urban functions, civic centre, subdivision pattern, abandoned town site, urban square, fire hydrant, market place, abandoned wharf, relocated civic centre, boundary feature, municipal Coat of Arms

4 Building settlements, towns and cities	Land tenure	Local themes	Activities and processes for identifying forms of ownership and occupancy of land and water, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal	Fence, survey mark, subdivision pattern, land title document, boundary hedge, , stone wall, shelterbelt, cliff, river, seawall, rock engravings, shelters & habitation sites, cairn, survey mark, trig station, colonial/state border markers.
4 Building settlements, towns and cities	Utilities	Local themes	Activities associated with the provision of services, especially on a communal basis	Water pipeline, sewage tunnel, gas retort, powerhouse, County Council office, garbage dump, windmill, radio tower, bridge, culvert, weir, well, cess pit, reservoir, dam, places demonstrating absence of utilities at Aboriginal fringe camps
4 Building settlements, towns and cities	Accommodation	Local themes	Activities associated with the provision of accommodation, and particular types of accommodation – does not include architectural styles – use the theme of Creative Endeavour for such activities.	Terrace, apartment, semi-detached house, holiday house, hostel, bungalow, mansion, shack, house boat, caravan, cave, humpy, migrant hostel, homestead, cottage, house site (archaeological).
5 Working	Labour	Local themes	Activities associated with work practises and organised and unorganised labour	Trade union office, Bundy clock, time-and-motion study (document), union banner, union membership card, strike site, staff change rooms, servants quarters, shearing shed, green ban site, brothel, kitchen, nurses station, hotel with an occupational patronage.
6 Educating	Education	Local themes	Activities associated with teaching and learning by children and adults, formally and informally.	School, kindergarten, university campus, mechanics institute, playground, hall of residence, text book, teachers college, sail training boat wreck, sportsfield, seminary, field studies centre, library, physical evidence of academic achievement (e.g. a medal or certificate).

7 Governing	Defence	Local themes	Activities associated with defending places from hostile takeover and occupation	Battle ground, fortification, RAAF base, barracks, uniforms, military maps and documents, war memorials, shipwreck lost to mines, scuttled naval vessel, POW camp, bomb practice ground, parade ground, massacre site, air raid shelter, drill hall,
7 Governing	Government and administration	Local themes	Activities associated with the governance of local areas, regions, the State and the nation, and the administration of public programs – includes both principled and corrupt activities.	Municipal chamber, County Council offices, departmental office, legislative document, symbols of the Crown, State and municipal flags, official heraldry, ballot box, mayoral regalia, places acquired/disposed of by the state, customs boat, pilot boat, site of key event (eg federation, royal visit), protest site, physical evidence of corrupt practises.
7 Governing	Law and order	Local themes	Activities associated with maintaining, promoting and implementing criminal and civil law and legal processes	Courthouse, police station, lock-up, protest site, law chambers, handcuffs, legal document, gaol complex, water police boat, police vehicle, jail, prison complex (archaeological), detention centre, judicial symbols
7 Governing	Welfare	Local themes	Activities and process associated with the provision of social services by the state or philanthropic organisations	Orphanage, retirement home, public housing, special school, trades training institution, employment agency,
8 Developing Australia's cultural life	Domestic life	Local themes	Activities associated with creating, maintaining, living in and working around houses and institutions.	Domestic artefact scatter, kitchen furnishings, bed, clothing, garden tools, shed, arrangement of interior rooms, kitchen garden, pet grave, chicken coop, home office, road camp, barrack, asylum.

8 Developing Australia's cultural life	Creative endeavour	Local themes	Activities associated with the production and performance of literary, artistic, architectural and other imaginative, interpretive or inventive works; and/or associated with the production and expression of cultural phenomena; and/or environments that have inspired such creative activities.	Opera house, theatre costume, film studio, writer's studio, parade tableau, manuscripts, sound recording, cinema, exemplar of an architectural style, work of art, craftwork, and/or public garden, bandstand, concert hall, rock art site, rotunda, library, public hall; and/or a, particular place to which there has been a particular creative, stylistic or design response.
8 Developing Australia's cultural life	Leisure	Local themes	Activities associated with recreation and relaxation	Resort, ski lodge, chalet, cruise ship, passenger rail carriage, swimming pool, dance hall, hotel, caravan park, tourist brochures, park, beach, clubhouse, lookout, common, bush walking track, Aboriginal Christmas camp site, fishing spot, picnic place, swimming hole.
8 Developing Australia's cultural life	Religion	Local themes	Activities associated with particular systems of faith and worship	Church, monastery, convent, rectory, presbytery, manse, parsonage, hall, chapter house, graveyard, monument, church organ, synagogue, temple, mosque, madrasa, carved tree, burial ground
8 Developing Australia's cultural life	Social institutions	Local themes	Activities and organisational arrangements for the provision of social activities	CWA Room, Masonic hall, School of Arts, Mechanic's Institute, museum, art gallery, RSL Club, public hall, historical society collection, public library, community centre, Aboriginal mission hall or school room.
8 Developing Australia's cultural life	Sport	Local themes	Activities associated with organised recreational and health promotional activities	Oval, race course, swimming pool, bowling club, bowling green, trophies, calendar of fixtures, cricket set, yacht pens, tennis court, rugby field, speedway, sporting equipment, bocce court.

9 Marking the phases of life	Birth and Death	Local themes	Activities associated with the initial stages of human life and the bearing of children, and with the final stages of human life and disposal of the dead.	Birth control clinic, maternity hospital, nursery, baby clinic, baptism register, circumcision equipment, and Hospice, nursing home, funeral parlour, grave furnishings, cremation site, cemetery, burial register, disaster site, memorial plantings, shipwreck with loss of life,
9 Marking the phases of life	Persons	Local themes	Activities of, and associations with, identifiable individuals, families and communal groups	A monument to an individual, a family home, a dynastic estate, private chapel, a birthplace, a place of residence, a gendered site, statue, Coat of Arms, commemorative place name, place dedicated to memory of a person (e.g. hospital wing).

Notes:

Editorial

- The table is arranged numerically in the order of the national themes, and then within each national theme alphabetically in order of the state themes – no other particular order is intended.

Thematic usages

- The inclusion of an example against one theme does not exclude its consideration against one or more of the other themes (e.g. Asylum) to indicate that the physical development of an item can be shaped by more than one historical process of theme during its existence.
- Aboriginal histories can be analysed using any theme(s) relevant to the place or object being considered – it is not necessary to restrict analysis to the theme of ‘Aboriginal cultures and interactions with other cultures’ only
- The theme of ‘Domestic Life’ can be used to explore the historical contexts for interior or private, domestic spaces and objects.
- The theme of ‘Forestry’ can be used for the active management of natural and regrowth trees for timber production while the theme of ‘Agriculture’ can be used for the intensive cultivation of exotic trees for purposes other than timber production.

Correlations

- The placement of the 36 State themes against the National themes was informed by the arrangement of the 84 national sub-themes and 116 national sub-sub-themes developed by the AHC for each of its National themes – the placements are not random.
- The development of local themes is accommodated within this framework with each local theme regarded as a correlation to a State theme in a similar manner to the relationship between the State and National themes
- Generally, local = local government area, but can also be used in other ways, such as a particular ethnic or social community, or a locality that is smaller than an LGA or straddles an LGA boundary, or a locality larger than an LGA such as a SHR historical region or an ecclesiastical diocese or an area smaller than the whole state but larger than an LGA, such as the area within an Aboriginal nation or Land Council.

APPENDIX 2: NOTES FOR THE HISTORIAN OR THOSE COMMISSIONING A HISTORIAN

When items are assessed under Criterion A, it is expected that the following matters will be addressed to satisfy the recommendations of the Heritage Council and heritage legislation and procedures generally.

The historian working in the heritage field will generally be working towards a quite specific outcome – an assessment of the historical values and significance of an item.

The historian will generally be researching and preparing data on a specific item and its contexts, often in a rather formulaic manner, and then providing a concluding assessment on whether the item is important.

The data and assessments will usually be required to conform to a certain format, such as a nomination form, or will be part of a conservation management plan. Experience in report-style writing and presentation will be an advantage.

The preparation of the historic chronological narrative and the thematic summaries will enable greater scope in writing styles and formats, but the aim will still be to provide an understanding of the significance of the items being contextualised.

Examples could include a history of a local government area or other geographical region, or a thematic approach such as defence or welfare or fishing, or a focus on particular item types such as corner shops, religious schools or collections of objects relating to the spread of electricity.

The presentation of historical writing in the heritage field should be informed by the requirements of the chosen format and the client's wishes. Recording or presentation technology, especially in electronic media such as websites, and the requirements for report-style writing from government agencies, will be important factors.

The brief for the work should clearly identify who the audience/client will be for the finished product, and the forms in which it is to be presented. If it doesn't, the historian should clarify this before commencing work. Even when no formal or written brief is provided, it is critical that these matters are agreed upon beforehand.

The best historical research and analysis will be achieved by the involvement of a trained, experienced, professional historian, whether relating documentary evidence to physical evidence, integrating documentary and physical evidence, evaluating forms of evidence, or co-ordinating or supervising historical researchers.

A historian working in the heritage field (as with any other professional) needs to be aware of their own tastes and values, and acknowledge that they may influence their analyses and assessments.

It is important that a historian working in the heritage field engages in field work and understands the setting, associated objects and items, and other pieces of evidence in relation to the heritage item being studied. Engaging with other heritage professionals also helps the historian to consider notions of intangibility and the spirit of place.

The practice of 'reading the fabric' of a heritage item – as you would read any other document - is a skill that needs to be learnt and constantly practised. The notion that the historian only works in the paper archives and does not need to visit and experience a place is not appropriate in the heritage field.

It is important to be aware that the term "interpretation" has a specific meaning when applied to the work of a historian, as compared to that of a curator or site interpreter. Interpretation planning requires a different set of skills than history writing - although it may be derived from the historical understanding provided by the historian.