

SITKA HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN *DRAFT*



Sitka Historic Preservation Commission
City and Borough of Sitka
Sitka, Alaska

Date 2025

A Guide to Historical & Cultural Resource Identification, Preservation, and Advocacy

Sitka Historic Preservation Plan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Historic Preservation is the preservation and protection of structures, sites and landscapes of historical or cultural significance; Historic Preservation Planning is the organized approach by a community to compile an inventory of its resources, to document the status of those resources, and the challenges and opportunities for their preservation, in order to make clear and achievable goals for preservation as the community grows and changes.

Sitka is special, in the deep heritage we have as a community in the heart of Tlingít Aaní, and in the respect and care we have for it. This Historic Preservation Plan is for the City and Borough of Sitka’s Historic Preservation Commission to take leadership in achieving community priorities for historic preservation into the future.

It starts with a synopsis of historic preservation programs in the United States and Alaska, then the history of Sitka’s preservation program and how it works now.

Then, the plan has a list of Historic Contexts for Sitka, each with a geographic area, a time, and a theme, to group historic resources together for evaluation; a list of properties on the National Register; and a description of the current Inventory.

Next, there is a description of historic preservation successes and needs, and a list of potential Goals and Actions for Sitka’s historic preservation program going forward.

INTRODUCTION

Sitka is in the heart of Lingít Aaní, or Tlingit Land. Human occupation of this place goes back to the last ice age and before and Sheet'ka, or Sitka, has been a major center of Tlingit civilization for thousands of years. Russians built an outpost here in 1804 which became the administrative center for their colonies. Sitka was the principal community and seat of government when Alaska became part of the United States in 1867, until losing the capital in 1906. Sitka continues to be a center of culture and history in

Alaska, recognized by Alaskans and by people all over the world. The continuity from ancient history to today may be unique among Alaska settlements.

Historic Preservation is the preservation and protection of structures, sites and landscapes of historical significance. Those might be called historic properties, historic resources, or cultural resources, and include structures, objects, buildings, districts, sites, landscapes, and archaeological sites that are significant in local, state, national, or Indigenous history. That significance may be in aspects of history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, culture or heritage.

The history of a community is part of its identity, and how we know ourselves. The existence of actual sites of history provides a tangible connection between the roots of a community and its people, sustaining its unique character and personality. Preservation also has significant economic benefits, in saving money over building new, in heritage tourism, and revitalizing towns and neighborhoods.

In the 21st century, Historic Preservation is expanding in scope, to include Cultural Landscapes, and Traditional Cultural Properties, and more sites significant to groups and communities who have been under-represented in historic preservation in the past.

This Sitka Historic Preservation Plan is meant to reflect the community's goals for historic preservation, to bring attention to the value of our heritage, and to guide efforts by local government to **identity, preserve and protect the valuable historic and cultural resources of the Sitka community.**

Sitka is special in having had a formal historic preservation program since the early 1990s, and an automatic review of construction projects that may have an impact on historic resources. We have an abundance of historic properties, and many of them have been restored and reused in exemplary ways.

At the same time, we have challenges: not everyone is aware of the value of our built heritage, and many historic buildings need work or are critically endangered.

What are the historic resources of Sitka? Some are obvious, like St. Michael's Orthodox Cathedral, but others might be hidden or unrecognized. What are the needs, to protect those historic resources? What are our priorities, for saving and making the public aware of our physical heritage?

The City and Borough of Sitka became a Certified Local Government in 1994, making the City eligible to receive federal Historic Preservation Fund grants. Requirements for that status include writing a Historic Preservation Plan and updating that plan regularly. This current Historic Preservation Plan is an update of the one written in 1994, which is in an Appendix.

This plan update started in 2009 with a Certified Local Government grant for that purpose. The work of the contractor was not acceptable to the Commission, so a commission member finished the contract. Due to the time constraints then, and the difficulty of writing and revising the plan by a group with many other duties, the plan remained in draft form through 2024. In January 2025 the plan was edited and updated, and Historic Contexts added.

A community Historic Preservation Plan is only as useful and valid to the extent it reflects the community's values and priorities. During the original work on the plan, there were public meetings and a survey. Sitka's Comprehensive Plan update, completed in 2018, included robust public participation, including goals for historic preservation.

The goals and actions in this plan draft will be reviewed by the public at large, stakeholders such as the Sitka National Historical Park, and by the Sitka Tribe of Alaska and its Cultural Resources Committee. Priorities and timelines will be incorporated by the SHPC into the Goals and Actions.



Figure 1.

List of Abbreviations

AHRS	Alaska Heritage Resources Survey
ANB	Alaska Native Brotherhood
CBS	City and Borough of Sitka
CLG	Certified Local Government
HABS	Historic American Building Survey
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NPS	National Park Service
National Register	National Register of Historic Places
NTHP,	
National Trust	National Trust for Historic Preservation
OHA	Office of History and Archaeology (State of Alaska)
SHPC	Sitka Historic Preservation Commission
SHPO	Alaska State Historic Preservation Office(r)
STA	Sitka Tribe of Alaska



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections
Figure 2.



Figure 3.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAMS IN THE UNITED STATES

National Level Historic Preservation Programs

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 is the foundation of historic preservation in the United States. This Act includes guidelines for historic preservation, and a structure for states and local governments to monitor and encourage historic preservation.

It is a common misconception that federal law restricts what a private property owner can do, but it **does not** unless there are federal funds or resources involved. Because historic preservation on private property in the United States is voluntary, local Historic Preservation Commissions have an important role in educating the public about its value and importance.

The State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) is a federal appointment in each state responsible for implementation of the National Historic Preservation Act. SHPO can also stand for the State Historic Preservation Office.

Section 106 of the NHPA requires **federal** undertakings (as well as projects receiving **federal funding**) be reviewed by the **State Historic Preservation Officer** for their impact on historic resources. If a project has a negative impact and the project can't be modified to avoid that impact, it requires mitigation.

The **National Register of Historic Places**, a list of sites of historical significance, with **National Historic Landmark** status for sites of national significance, is managed by the National Park Service.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, revised in 1995, also managed by the National Park Service, includes four Treatments for historic properties: **Preservation, Rehabilitation, Restoration, and Reconstruction**.

Most commonly, historic preservation is of buildings, structures and landscapes, and the most common approach is **adaptive reuse**, or the **Rehabilitation** standard, in which a historic structure is brought into a new use that is compatible with its historic character. **Standards for Rehabilitation** is in an Appendix.

The Secretary of the Interior's Professional Qualifications Standards in Archaeology and Historic Preservation are for federal contractors in History, Historic Architecture, Archaeology, and Architectural History.

A Certified Local Government (CLG) is a local government certified to participate in federal historic preservation funding and programs. Requirements include having a Historic Preservation Commission, a Historic Preservation Plan, and local review of projects that may have an impact on historic resources. **In 1994 the City and Borough of Sitka became a Certified Local Government.**

The **Historic Preservation Fund** is federal funding for implementing the NHPA. **CLG Grants** are federal Historic Preservation Fund Grants that can go only to Certified Local Governments.

The National Park Service also has deep **technical resources** available to the public for historic preservation, including how to evaluate and plan and detailed studies of the best ways to clean or preserve various materials.

The **Save America's Treasures (SAT)** program is historic preservation funding administered by the National Park Service for properties with National Historic Landmark status. Three SAT grants have been awarded in Sitka: Allen Memorial Building and Whitmore Hall on the Sheldon Jackson School National Historic Landmark, and the Japonski Island Boathouse on the Sitka Naval Operating Base and U.S. Coastal Defenses National Historic Landmark.

The **National Trust for Historic Preservation**, begun in 1949, became an independent nonprofit in 1996. This organization offers technical assistance, small grants, and advocacy. It publishes a list of **America's**

11 Most Endangered Properties “to raise awareness about the threats facing some of the nation's greatest treasures.” In 1999 the Richard H. Memorial Building (Allen Hall) on the Sheldon Jackson Campus, and in 2024, the Sitka Tlingit Clan Houses, were on this list.

The Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) began in 1933, documenting historic structures in detail. Drawings are archived at the Library of Congress. Many Sitka buildings are included. It was the HABS drawings of St. Michael's Cathedral that made it possible to rebuild it after it burned in 1966.

Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives include a 20% tax credit for the costs of rehabilitation of commercial buildings that are listed on the National Register which are rehabilitated according to the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*. Other incentives include a 10% credit for substantial rehabilitation of non-historic buildings placed in service before 1936, and a tax credit for donating a historic preservation easement.

Alaska Historic Preservation Programs

Alaska's **Office of History and Archaeology (OHA)**, part of State Parks in the Department of Natural Resources, provides technical resources for historic preservation, and reviews projects for their impact on historic resources, per state and federal law. They administer the federal Historic Preservation Fund grants. They also create and regularly update the **State Historic Preservation Plan**. The current plan is *Saving Our Past: Planning for Our Future* (2018-2023), and the next plan is in development.

The Alaska Office of History and Archaeology maintains the **Alaska Heritage Resource Survey database** or **AHRS**, which assigns a number to every historic or potentially significant cultural site in Alaska. Because some of those sites are sensitive, the survey is not publicly accessible.

The **Alaska Historical Commission** is the citizen review board for state history policy and makes recommendations on geographic naming proposals and for Historic Preservation Fund grant awards.

Preservation Alaska, formerly the Alaska Association for Historic Preservation, is a non-profit that advocates for and gives small grants for Alaska preservation projects. They publish an annual list of **Ten Most Endangered Historic Properties** for Alaska. This list has included many Sitka properties, including the Sheldon Jackson Campus and the St. Peter's See House. In 2024, the Sitka Clan Houses was on this list.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN SITKA

Background

Sitkans have recognized the value of historic preservation for more than a half century: the community of Sitka came together to rebuild St. Michael's Orthodox Cathedral after the 1848 original burned to the ground in 1966. People in Sitka recognized the importance of this landmark to our local heritage and identity, to the parishioners, and, for our tourism industry. The building is a National Historic Landmark. Groups and individuals have been preserving buildings such as St. Peter's Episcopal Church and private homes for many years.

Sitka's formal historic preservation program began in the early 1990s, when Sitka received Certified Local Government status as part of the project to rehabilitate the old Post Office and Court House (1938) as Sitka's municipal offices.

In 1986 the USPS moved the Post Office from the historic downtown Post Office and Court House to a new facility on Sawmill Creek Road. By law, the building was first offered to other federal agencies, then to state entities, which declined to take it. **With the prospect of demolition,** a group of Sitkans led the effort to save the building and convert it into Sitka's city offices. The Assembly, with leadership from the

City Administrator, chartered the Sitka Historic Trust Board. The Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer authorized federal funding, through the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology, for a historic building survey, with the condition that the City and Borough of Sitka would then apply to become a Certified Local Government or CLG. The members of the Historic Trust Board became the first Historic Preservation Commission; members are listed in an Appendix.

That original report, by a historic architect, set out this building's architectural and social significance. **Next**, a CLG grant funded a structural survey and architectural conceptual plan for reuse. In January 1993, the Assembly approved converting the Post Office and Court House into a new city hall.

City and Borough of Sitka Historic Preservation Program

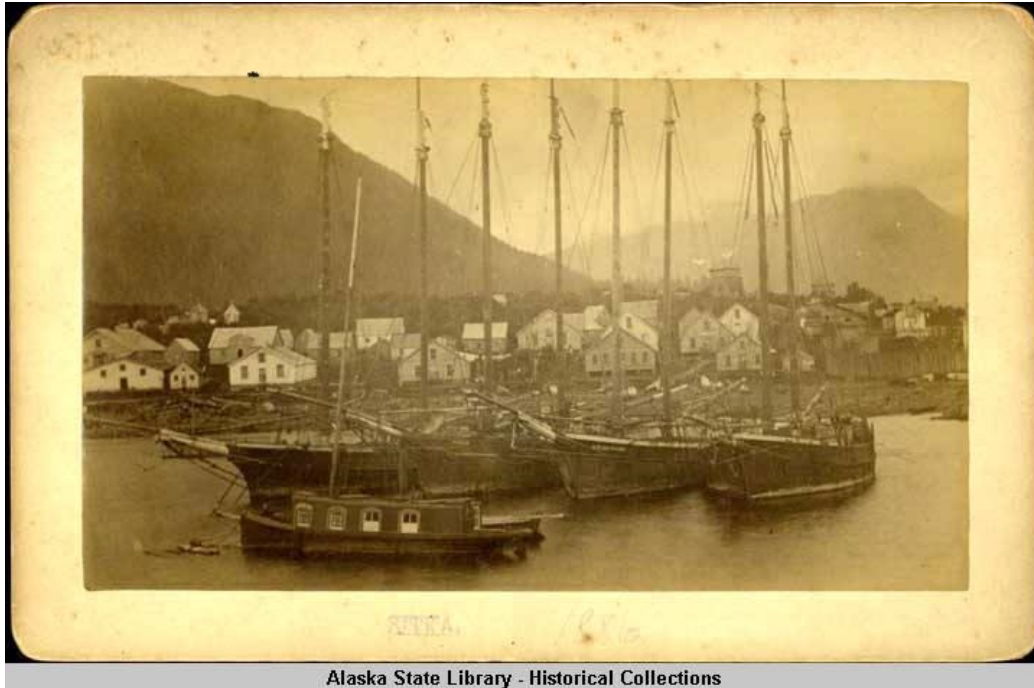
In order to become a Certified Local Government, in 1992 Sitka's City and Borough Assembly adopted a **Historic Preservation Ordinance**, with minor revision in 1993 (92-1075 and 93-1105, in an Appendix), establishing and defining the scope of Sitka's historic preservation program, which includes establishing the **Sitka Historic Preservation Commission (SHPC)** in 1993.

The SHPC is an advisory board to the Sitka City and Borough Assembly through the Planning Department, and has no independent authority. The Assembly appoints the seven member board, with four community-at-large seats, one Native-at-large seat, one Sitka Tribe of Alaska seat, and one Sitka Historical Society seat. A non-voting Assembly liaison also attends meetings. The Sitka Historical Commission meets monthly. (A list of past members is in an Appendix.)

Duties of the Sitka Historic Preservation Commission

Sitka's Historic Preservation Ordinance 92-1075 established the Sitka Historic Preservation Commission in Sitka's General Code. Per that ordinance, **the Commission shall:**

- Prepare and maintain an inventory of buildings and sites of historical, cultural, architectural, geographical and archaeological significance located in the City and Borough of Sitka
- Develop a preservation plan, providing for identification, protection and interpretation of this area's significant cultural resources
- Review and develop nominations to the National Register of Historic Places
- Review and make recommendations about local projects that might affect properties identified in the historic preservation plan
- Work toward the continuing education of citizens regarding historic preservation of the community's history
- Support the enforcement of the Alaska Historic Preservation Act
- Act in an advisory role to the Sitka Historical Society, the City and Borough of Sitka Planning Commission, and the Alaska Historic Sites Committee on all matters concerning historical districts in historic, prehistoric and archaeological preservation in the City and Borough of Sitka
- Coordinate with the Sitka Tribe of Alaska in historical matters involving Alaska Natives with the understanding that the Commission shall defer to the Tribe in matters concerning Alaska Natives in Sitka



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Figure 4.

To meet the requirement to maintain a system to survey and inventory Sitka's historic properties, the SHPC commissioned the ***Inventory of Historic Sites and Structures, City and Borough of Sitka***. (See more below, in the section on Sitka's Historic and Cultural Resources.)

In 2008 the CBS Assembly also designated the Historic Preservation Commission to recommend names for new streets. The names would then be approved by the Assembly. (Ordinance 2008-10, updating General Code 21.40.100, in an Appendix.)

The Historic Preservation Commission is probably most important for their **review of projects that could affect historic or cultural resources**. The Commission has also, with Sitka City and Borough Planning Department staff, designed guidelines for that review. This included designating areas in Sitka, including downtown, where review of building permits by the SHPC is mandatory. Getting the review established as a consistent requirement for construction permitting is a major achievement that took a great deal of effort.

These reviews, even though the commission's decision is only a recommendation, have not always been smooth. Overall, however, property owners and developers understand the importance of protecting historic resources and most are interested in the history of their property.

The commission also reviews state and federal projects per Section 106, reviews applications for Historic Preservation Fund grants, and advises members of the public looking for information on how to preserve their properties.

The Commission has also applied for and received a CLG grant for a survey of downtown towards creating a historic district, and has sent City staff and commission members to historic preservation trainings.

Sitka Comprehensive Plan 2030: Historical, Cultural, and Arts Resources Action

More evidence of public support of preservation are the preservation Action Items in the 2018 update of Sitka's Comprehensive Plan. In 2018, the City and Borough of Sitka's Planning Department, with the

Planning Commission, concluded a two-year public process of updating and revising the comprehensive and land use plans for the municipality. The *Sitka Comprehensive Plan 2030* lists a number of historic preservation action items in the Historical, Cultural, and Arts Resources Section, that are relevant to this Historic Preservation Plan:

- Action HCA 1.1a:** Develop, adopt, and implement a Sitka Historic Preservation Plan.
- Action HCA 1.1b:** Facilitate and support CLG grants to obtain National Register Historic District Status for eligible districts.
- Action HCA 1.1c:** Coordinate and collaborate with interested parties to compile cemetery information.
- Action HCA 1.1h:** Create a memorial and naming policy to integrate place names that are representative of Sitka's diverse history into community facilities, services, places, and streets.
- Action HCA 1.1i:** Develop a Master Plan for Katlian/Kaagwaataan area in area in collaboration with Sitka Tribe of Alaska, Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, property owners, and other interested parties.
- Action HCA 2.1:** Advertise historic preservation opportunities, tax incentives, and grants available to rehabilitate historic properties and sites within districts.
- Action HCA 4.1a:** Market and promote use of Harrigan Centennial Hall and Sitka History Museum.
- Action HCA 4.1c:** Create a historical zoning district or overlay for Sheldon Jackson Campus allowing for broader range of uses. Cross reference with LU 3.2.
- Action HCA 5.1c:** Encourage the display of interpretive signs for historic structures through zoning code provisions and other appropriate means.

Sitka Tribe of Alaska

The Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA) is the federally recognized tribal government for more than 4,000 Alaska Native and Native American citizens of Sheet'ká or Sitka. Due to the long history of occupation of Sheet'ká by the Tlingit people, STA is an essential partner to the City and Borough of Sitka in Historic Preservation.

In 1995, STA completed the *Sitka Tribe of Alaska Historic Preservation Plan*. STA has started a Nomination for the Sitka Indian Village as a National Historic District and has also worked with other entities to document traditional places, their names and their significance, and has overseen historic building reports and archaeological investigations in Sitka and throughout the Borough.

State and Federal Partners in Sitka

The National Forest Service, National Park Service, and the State of Alaska also manage land within the City and Borough of Sitka. These entities employ archaeologists and historians, and partner with CBS and STA to document and safeguard historical and cultural resources.

The **National Park Service (NPS)** administers the Sitka National Historical Park. The NPS acquired the Russian Bishop's House (1843) in 1973 and undertook the massive effort to save and preserve it.

The vast majority of the land in the Sitka and Borough of Sitka is in the **Tongass National Forest**. The National Forest Service is responsible for protecting historical and cultural resources on National Forest Lands.

The **State of Alaska** has jurisdiction over all **tidelands** in the Borough not owned by the municipality, federal government or private entities.

The State of Alaska also administers sites including the Fort Rousseau State Historical Park, the Old Sitka State Historic Site, Magoun Islands State Marine Park, and Noow Tlein/Castle Hill.

SITKA'S HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Identification and Documentation

The mandate of the Historic Preservation Commission includes identifying and documenting the historic and cultural resources within the City and Borough of Sitka. Historic properties are any districts, sites, buildings, structures, landscapes or objects which are eligible for, or already listed in, the National Register of Historic Places.

To be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, a property has to be old, normally 50 years or more, it has to have historical or cultural significance, and it has to have integrity, so that enough is still there to represent what is significant about it. Property types are Buildings, Structures, Objects, Sites and Districts, and Cultural Landscapes. Any of these property types can be Traditional Cultural Places, which may be a structure or may be a natural feature or place, defined by longstanding, continuing, culturally significant use of that place.

Areas of significance are state, local, or national; and include association with a person or historical events; construction or design; or its potential to yield information. Sitka has many places on the National Register, including properties with **National Historic Landmark** status—properties with significance to our nation's history. See below for the complete list.

The significance or importance of an individual property can only be evaluated and explained within its **Historic Context**, defined by the NPS as a **theme, date range, and geographic area**, and everything that can be known about it. The Historic Context groups properties so that they can be evaluated together. Within each Historic Context there are **property types**, which further help define and evaluate a particular resource in context. Just one Historic Context can be a massive document, so the following Historic Contexts for Sitka are necessarily a sketch. Themes necessarily overlap, so that one particular property might fit into two or more contexts, for example, residential buildings and government, or schools and religion. Ultimately, all of Sitka's Historic Contexts, taken together, will provide a comprehensive picture of human use of our area.

The SHPC commissioned Vanguard Research to create an inventory of historic resources in Sitka, ***Inventory of Historic Sites and Structures, City and Borough of Sitka (1997)***. Part I of the plan is an overview and bibliography and is in an Appendix. Part II contains the list of 748 sites in the State of Alaska's Alaska Heritage Resources Survey (AHRS) database, and 352 sites not on the AHRS. Because they include sensitive archaeological and burial sites, they are not available to the public.

This document should be updated; when originally completed, the default for being old enough for eligibility was 1947, and in 2025, that date is 1975, and so there are potentially sites that can be added, just because they are now old enough. The State of Alaska's database, the Alaska Heritage Resources Survey, is constantly being updated. Some of the AHRS sites were buildings that no longer exist. The AHRS sites should be updated in Sitka's inventory, and, in turn, the sites in the Sitka inventory not yet on the AHRS should be added to the AHRS.

The other challenge is the use of this list: it is not a public document but must be available to certain Planning Department staff, so that projects can be planned to not have an adverse impact on these sites.

Another list, that is publicly available, is the properties in Sitka that are already listed on the National Register of Historic Places, below, and the list of Sitka's cemeteries, listed in an appendix.

In the following list of Historic Contexts, **Sitka Borough** is the entire City and Borough of Sitka. **Sitka Town** includes Japonski Island and the entire Sitka road system.



Figure 5.

HISTORIC CONTEXTS FOR SITKA

Sitka Borough, Indigenous, 10,000 Years BP to Present

This theme is for Indigenous sites. Periods within this theme include **10,000 Years BP to 300 Years BP**. At least 10,000 years ago, and possibly before, southeastern Alaska had ice-free areas that were used by people. Because of the weight of glaciers during the Ice Age, and the rebound effect as they retreated (which is still occurring), these sites might be currently under water, or, at elevation, depending on exactly where they are. Tlingit and other Northwest Coast cultures were in their distinctive form at approximately 5,000 years Before Present.

1725 to 1867 Starting about 300 years ago, European influences began to come into this area. This included great quantities of trade goods, the wealth generated through leveraging those goods in trade to the interior and throughout the region, and, the impact of smallpox epidemics which devastated the population.

1867 to present Distinctive Tlingit sites continue to be created and used.

Property types include temporary or seasonal camps, burials, battlegrounds, forts, sites of resource use and cultivation, permanent settlements, petroglyphs and petrographs and other markers, trails, canoe haul-outs, and sites of work such as canoe building or tool-making.

Examples of sites and properties include canoe haul-outs, garden sites, fish traps and clam gardens, and sites in Sitka town predating 1867, such as Noow Tlein/Castle Hill.

Sitka Borough, Colonial, 1725 to 1867

This theme is for the physical traces of the various European, United States, and Asian seafarers who came to this area in this period. Their intentions were to claim land, to trade, or to harvest resources themselves. In 1799 Russians negotiated for a permanent hunting camp at Gajaa Heen/Starrigavan for hundreds of Native hunters and workers from the Aleutians, Kodiak Island, and the coast of the Western Gulf of Alaska. That camp was burned out in 1802, but after the Battle of 1804 Russians again built a permanent settlement, on the current site of downtown Sitka. In this period Tlingit clans continued to

control their lands and resources and to constrain Russian activities, but were again decimated by smallpox epidemics, most severely in 1836-37.

Within this theme are **Russian Settlements 1799-1867**, including at downtown Sitka.

Property types include buildings and other structures, which can be further broken down as defensive, commercial, administrative, religious, housing, or as part of resource extraction; battle grounds; temporary camps; sites of trade; sites of resource extraction (fishing, logging, mining); sites of industry such as shipbuilding; burial grounds; and sites for public recreation.

Examples of properties and sites include Old Sitka National Historic Landmark (traces of the Russian settlement and battlefield), the Russian Bishop's House, and the wreck site of the Russian ship *Neva*.

Sitka Town, Indigenous, 1867 to 1977

When Alaska became part of the United States, Indigenous people were excluded from citizenship and had their lands and other property appropriated by the government and white civilians. This theme is for the distinctive and evolving Indigenous culture, in the new blend with American culture in this era, as Native leaders worked to get back land rights against racial bias to be fully included in Sitka's economy and culture.

Property types include buildings and other structures, which can be further broken down as commercial, Clan Houses, other residential, districts, community organizations, or as part of resource extraction; sites of industry such as boatbuilding; and burial grounds.

Examples of properties include the **Sitka Indian Village**; individual Clan Houses; the Alaska Native Brotherhood Hall National Historic Landmark; the Cottages Community (at entrance to Sitka National Historical Park); Andrew Hope boat shop; and the ANB Cemetery (off Indian River Road).

Sitka Borough Outside Sitka Town, Settlement and Industry, 1867-Present

Starting with becoming part of the United States in 1867, Americans came to this area to exploit natural resources such as timber, gold and other minerals, and fish. People also came throughout this time wanting simply to live away from settlements.

Property types include districts, such as canneries and mining towns, and structures, which can be broken down into industrial, residential, commercial, energy generation, social, religious, and administrative. Other property types are transportation related, including docks, roads, trails and railroads; mining tunnels, shafts and adits; equipment such as boilers, generators, stamp mills, dams, power lines, fuel tanks and railroad cars; and agriculture sites such as livestock, fur farm, and garden sites.

Examples of properties are the remains of the community of Chichagof on west Chichagof Island, mines and corduroy road at the head of Silver Bay, fur farms on the islands south of Sitka, and Sitkoh Bay cannery.

Sitka Town, Commercial and Industrial, 1867-Present

When Alaska became part of the United States, the U.S military worked quickly to establish their authority over Alaska's Native people. Over this period Alaska's economy was very poor, especially in the first decade, when trade was mainly illicit. White settlement was slow, driven by entrepreneurs and prospectors looking for gold and other minerals, fish, and lumber. Sitka's economy was based on government, mining and tourism until the 1910s, when commercial fishing became the most important driver.

Commercial and Industrial properties in Sitka can be divided into **1867-1939** and **1939 to present**. Other

themes within this Context might be Filipino, Chinese, Tlingit, or other under-represented ethnicities among business owners, or types of businesses, such as bars or dry-goods stores.

Property types include buildings and other structures, which can be further broken down as retail establishments, warehouses and storage facilities, manufacturing including breweries, agriculture sites, and seafood processing. Other property types are transportation related, such as commercial docks, ships and shipwrecks, or equipment such as retorts.

Examples of properties are the Columbia Bar, the Pyramid Cannery (The Quay), and the Sitka Hotel.

Sitka Town, Social, Cultural, and Religion, 1867-Present

Sitkans have always expressed solidarity and identity through forming churches, social clubs, and cultural institutions, so the nature of those buildings tells us about those aspirations, identities, and origins.

Property types are primarily buildings, which can be broken down into houses of worship, and associated structures such as clergy housing, social halls and religious schools; and social clubs.

Examples of properties in Sitka include St. Peter's Episcopal Church and the Moose Lodge.

Sitka Town, Education and Recreation, 1867-Present

Education and public recreation are an essential part of any community's aspirations and identity. Property types include structures, including buildings for teaching, housing for teachers, students and other staff, and for running the school such as a power house or offices; other property types are playgrounds, parks, sports fields, recreational trails, or other landscaping.

Examples in Sitka are the Sheldon Jackson School National Historic Landmark, Xóots Elementary School, Crescent Park.

Sitka Borough, Military, 1867-Present

Sitka has had military installations since 1867, with housing for Army personnel, then Marines. WWII saw a transformation of Sitka with a Naval Operating Base for seaplanes and associated Harbor Defenses on Japonski, Alice and Charcoal Islands and throughout Sitka Sound.

Within this context is **City of Sitka, WWII Military, 1937-1945.**

Property types include structures, including housing, group housing (barracks), defensive structures, docks, roads, communications and energy infrastructure, and maintenance and industrial infrastructure.

Examples of properties include the Sitka Naval Operating Base and US Coast Defenses National Historic Landmark, the radar site on Harbor Mountain, Fort Babcock on Kruzof Island, the gun emplacement above Katlian Street, and the searchlight installation on Kayak Island.

Sitka Borough, Government, 1867-Present

Alaska was administered by the federal government until Statehood in 1959, and since that time the federal government has maintained a footprint in Sitka. This theme is for properties built by or associated with federal, state and local government.

Property types include structures for housing, administration, maintenance and repair, and public facilities such as court houses and post offices, public-use recreational cabins, woodsheds and latrines; and trails, bridges, and docks, and equipment and sites such as generators, power lines, and docks.

Examples of properties include the U.S. Post Office and Court House, A-frame Forest Service Cabins, the Seaplane Turnaround at Katlian and Halibut Point Road, and Biorka Island FAA installation.

Japonski, Alice and Charcoal Islands, "Mt. Edgecumbe" 1945-1972

This Historic Context is part of the above. The federal facilities on Japonski, Alice and Charcoal Islands were turned over to the Bureau of Indian Affairs Alaska Native Service in 1946. From then until the early 1980s, the federal government controlled all property on “The Island,” and until 1972 the only link to Sitka was by Shore Boat, the federally-operated ferry across Sitka Channel.

Because most of the infrastructure was already there, built by the military, there is substantial overlap with WWII military theme.

Property types include structures, for housing, health care, maintenance, power generation, recreation, education and offices; roads, docks, trails, communications infrastructure and bridges.

Examples include Mt. Edgecumbe Hospital, Mt. Edgecumbe High School, and homes built by Mt. Edgecumbe High School.

Sitka Town, Transportation, Utilities and Communication, 1867-Present

As Sitka grew after 1867, citizens came together to build, or lobby for, infrastructure, including both private and public projects, such as the Sitka Power Company’s electricity generation plant at Silver Bay, a dam at Cascade Creek, a water tank on Harbor Mountain Road, and roads that connect our built environment.

Property types include structures such as power houses, equipment sheds, and dams; roads, docks, trails, bridges, flumes and transmission lines; and equipment such as boilers and transmission towers.

Examples of these properties in Sitka include the Cable House (Raven Radio building), the John W. O’Connell Memorial Bridge, and wood-stave water pipe below Blue Lake.

Sitka Town, Residential, 1867-Present

Residential buildings define a town’s character. Sitka’s housing reflects the demographic and economic history, and can be broken down into time period, such as **1867-1906** (when the Capital moved to Juneau), **1906-1939** (when Sitka was primarily a fishing village), and **1939-present**, which included multiple housing booms: WWII buildup, the construction of the pulp mill in 1959, and the doubling of Sitka’s population in the 1970s, with growth in Forest Service, Southeast Regional Health Consortium, UAS, and fisheries employment, and the arrival of the USCG Air Station Sitka.

Property type is primarily buildings: houses and apartment buildings and associated structures.

Residential buildings can be further broken down by architectural style, including **Gothic, Neoclassical, Modern, A-Frame, Split-Entry** (1970s and 1980s boxy 2-story houses with entry between the floors) or **Shingle-style**, and into **architect-designed or vernacular/builder’s style**, and into construction types such as **balloon-frame, timber-frame, log and concrete**.

Sitka properties include the May Mills House and the Abner Murray Apartments on Seward Street, the Cathedral Arms building, and the Cozy Homes, the identical one-story homes in the Brady Street and Lakeview Drive neighborhoods.

Sitka Town, Cemeteries and Burials, 1867-Present

Sitka’s history as a community and respect for those who went before is seen in the cemeteries. A list of cemeteries is in an Appendix.

Sitka Properties on the National Register of Historic Places

The National Park Service’s National Register of Historic Places is part of a nationwide program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect America’s historic and archeological resources of local or state and national significance.

Property Name	Date Added	Built	Significance
American Flag Raising Site (Castle Hill/Noow Tlein) National Historic Landmark	1966		Transfer Russia claims to U.S. 1867
Russian Bishop's House National Historic Landmark	1966	1841-43	Oldest surviving Russian colonial building, Russian Orthodox Church
St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral National Historic Landmark	1966	1848, 1978	First Orthodox cathedral in New World first non-Native settlement on Baranof Island
Old Sitka National Historic Landmark	1966	1799	
Sitka National Historical Park	1966	1890	Battle site, Indigenous monuments
Alaska Native Brotherhood Hall National Historic Landmark	1972	1914	Original Chapter of the Alaska Native Brotherhood
Sheldon Jackson Museum	1972		
W. P. Mills House	1977	1916	Architecture and construction
Emmons House	1977	1895	Association with ethnographer George Thornton Emmons
St. Peter's By the Sea Church	1978	1899	Architecture, first Episcopal church in Sitka
St. Peter's See House	1978	1905	Gothic Revival architecture
Mae Mills House	1978	1911-13	Colonial Revival architecture
Sitka Pioneer's Home	1979	1935, 1956	First facility designed for care of elderly part of communications network linking Alaska to lower states
Cable House and Station	1979	1904	
USCG&GS Seismological & Geomagnetic House "White House"	1986	1916	Gambrel roof cottage architecture, science and government
Sitka Naval Operating Base and U.S. Army Coastal Defenses National Historic Landmark	1986	1939-1945	Military defense WWII
Russian American Building 29/Tilson Building National Historic Landmark	1987	1840s-50s?	one of two surviving Russian colonial structures, commercial structures
Hanlon-Osbakken House	1992	1892	Queen Anne architecture
Abner Murray Apartments and Cottages	1992	1921-22	Commercial rental properties
Sitka U.S. Post Office and Court House	1997	1938	Art Moderne architecture, government
Sheldon Jackson School National Historic Landmark	2001	1911	Association with the Alaska Native Brotherhood Founders, architecture
Sitka National Cemetery	2012	1867-68	Association with U.S. Military presence in Alaska
Sitka Woman's Club Building	2024	1897	Social organizations

HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN PRACTICE

The most visible aspect of Sitka's historic preservation over the past few decades is in the **rehabilitation of historic buildings**. Preservation starts with a structural survey and planning, so that historic integrity is maintained even as the building is rehabilitated.

Planning work in Sitka includes a *Preservation Plan* for the entire Sheldon Jackson School National Historic Landmark, in 2004, and the *Sitka Tribe of Alaska Historic Preservation Plan*, 1995.

Private organizations rehabilitating buildings include the Allen Memorial Preservation Project, which was formed in the mid-1990s to save Allen Auditorium on the Sheldon Jackson School National Historic Landmark. Since 2011, the Sitka Fine Arts Camp has taken on millions of dollars of projects to preserve the historic campus. The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is actively restoring the Japonski Island Boathouse, a WWII boat shop on the Sitka Naval Operating Base and U.S. Coastal Defenses National Historic Landmark. The Sitka Sound Science Center has restored the Sage Building, and the congregation of St. Peter's Episcopal Church has worked to restore the church building as well as the See House, the Bishop's residence behind it. Individuals and businesses have restored the Bredvig Building and the Abner Murray Apartments on Seward Street.

Historic preservation in the United States began in the 20th century with protecting historically significant buildings. Sometimes this means preserving a building exactly as it was at one point in time, but most often today this is to keep the building in use by modifying and updating it for a new use while preserving its character-defining features, those qualities that make it worth saving.

Preservation of buildings is environmentally sustainable, because it keeps an old building out of the landfill and saves the costs of new construction. **The survival and preservation of distinctive and historic buildings and landscapes is the foundation of Sitka's visitor industry**, contributing to the local economy through tourism, and supporting community pride.

A 2011 [report for the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation on the economic impacts of historic preservation](#) found that historic preservation conserves resources by using existing public infrastructure, that renovation costs are roughly the same as new construction, and that adaptive re-use creates jobs, revitalizes downtowns, attracts investment and visitors and increases property values.

An important source of funding for local historic preservation by nonprofits has been federal **Historic Preservation Fund grants**. These are matching grants administered by the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology. **Over the years, those Historic Preservation Fund grants have brought around a half million dollars to Sitka.** Because they require matching, they leverage local resources, including donated labor and equipment and materials. A list of these grants is in an Appendix.

Another opportunity is when state or federal projects are determined to have an adverse impact on historic properties, per Section 106. The mandatory mitigation must promote historic preservation or interpretation. In Sitka one example was a report on the Army facilities on Alice and Charcoal Islands, mitigation for airport expansion.

Another important element of local preservation is to list places on the **National Register of Historic Places**. This requires a formal nomination, which is reviewed at the local, state and finally at the federal level. In 2001 the Sheldon Jackson School National Historic Landmark was listed, and in 2024 the Woman's Club Building on Harbor Drive. To be listed at the **National Historic Landmark** level, a site has to hold significance to the nation's history. Listing is a requirement for most historic preservation grants and also opens up tax credits and other incentives.

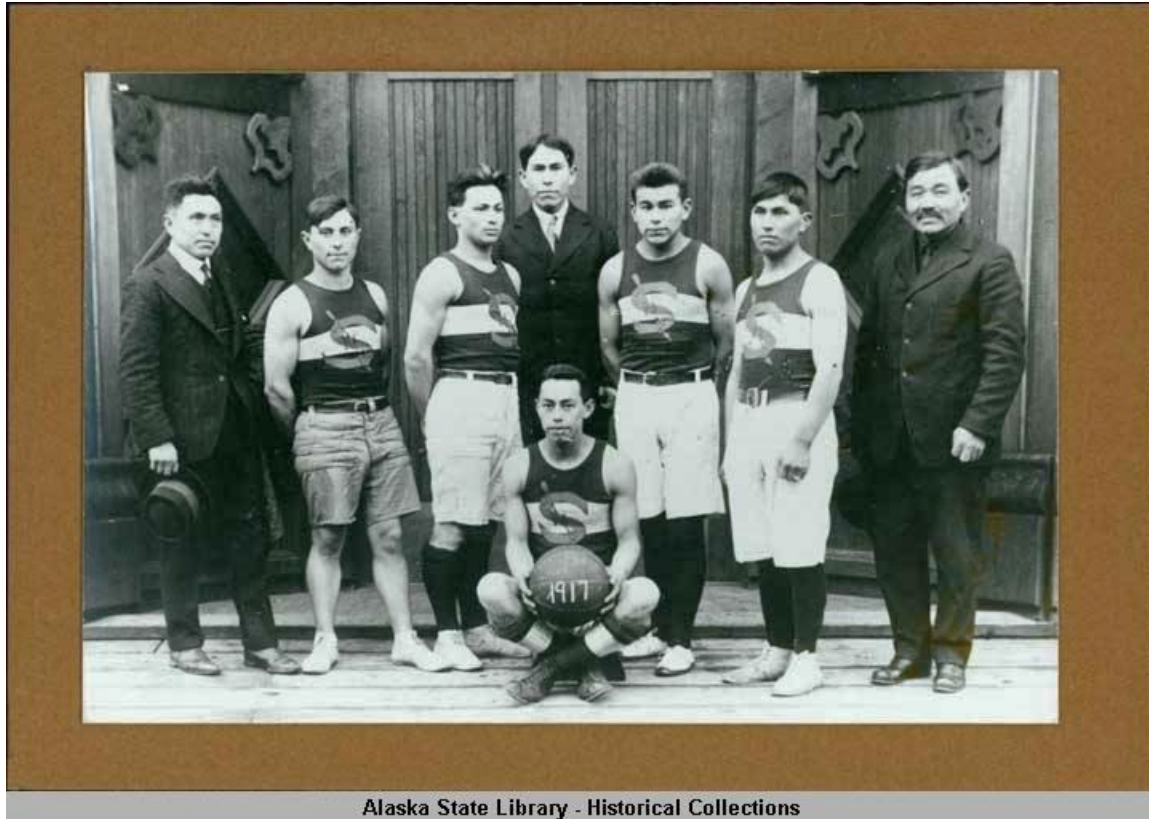


Figure 6.

Preservation Needs in Sitka

While many historic buildings have been restored in Sitka, others need attention. One of those is St. Michael's Russian Orthodox Cathedral, a National Historic Landmark, and the Sitka Indian Village's Clan Houses. The White House on Seward Street, which is on the National Register, is sitting empty. There is a need for financial resources and even legal and political assistance for historic preservation.

The 1997 Inventory needs updating, but even then, this is not a public document; there is a need for a public register for historic places that citizens can contribute to.

Many more properties and Districts could be recognized through nomination to the National Register.

Not everyone in Sitka is aware of the value of historic preservation, or knows about the history behind our visible heritage.

New construction is not always compatible or sympathetic to the character of historic neighborhoods. There could be education about how to design a building that enhances the historic character of the area.

While the process for having building permits reviewed for their impact on historic resources is excellent, there is a need for technical information for property owners about preservation and history.

There is a need for public information about what to do if cultural resources are encountered.

GOALS & ACTIONS

The following Goals and Actions come from the duties of the Sitka Historic Preservation Commission as set out in City Code (see above, page 11) and the Goals in the original Sitka Historic Preservation Plan (1994), in an Appendix.

All of the Actions could be supported by applying for a CLG grant.

These Goals and Actions are comprehensive; **public review is needed to decide priorities and timelines for accomplishment.**

Goal One

DEVELOP NEW PARTNERSHIPS AND RAISE AWARENESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCES REPRESENTING THE HISTORY OF UNDER-REPRESENTED COMMUNITIES, ESPECIALLY TLINGIT HISTORY

Sitka's people and history are diverse and deep. The Tlingit people have been here since Time Immemorial, and are still here, but this long history and presence is not as obvious to an observer as the history of Russians or white Americans. The SHPC will work to be more representative of all of Sitka's communities, and build its capacity in collaborating with the CBS Planning Commission, Sitka Historical Society, Sitka Tribe of Alaska, and ethnic and heritage communities.

Action 1

Develop a formal relationship between the Sitka Historic Preservation Commission and Cultural Resources Department and Committee of the Sitka Tribe of Alaska for regular consultation

Action 2

Develop formal communication with history, archaeology, historic architecture and anthropology professionals in Sitka working for the NPS and the Forest Service

Action 3

Work with STA to get more Tlingit names onto Sitka places, and educate the public about the significance of the names

Action 4

Invite appropriate ethnic, cultural and other groups and societies to contribute to SHPC meetings

Goal Two

IDENTIFY, PRESERVE, PROTECT AND ENHANCE THE HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES IN THE CITY AND BOROUGH OF SITKA.

In order to protect Sitka's resources, the SHPC has to know what they are, and what the preservation needs are, and to set priorities. One part of this is to update the Inventory of Historic Sites, but this is not a public document. The other component is to create criteria, and to compile a **local register** that only includes non-sensitive sites.

Action 1

Obtain a CLG grant to contract an update to Sitka's Inventory. The contractor would work with STA and federal and state agencies and the public to develop criteria for adding properties to the Inventory, and to add sites not currently listed. This would include reconciling the list of AHRS sites in the existing inventory to current AHRS listings, striking sites that no longer exist, adding the additional sites to the AHRS

Action 2

Develop a version of the inventory that can be shared with the public, as a register of historic

places in Sitka. Develop criteria and work with stakeholders, STA and the public to add sites

Action 3

Develop, with participation by the public, stakeholders and STA, a list of priorities for documentation and preservation and new Register nominations, with special attention to sites important to Indigenous history

Action 4

Encourage historic structure surveys and other documentation, National Register nominations, and historic preservation, by promoting the benefits and helping connect owners with technical and financial support

Goal Three

IMPROVE CITY PROCESSES TO INCLUDE CONSIDERATION OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN PLANNING

To assist the municipality with thoughtful growth and development, the SHPC has established a framework for decision-making that preserves the community's historic character. This framework should consider the diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural values and history of the community when planning all CBS projects and those requiring CBS approvals. Staff and commissioners must have a clear understanding of and background in their mission. Providing adequate training will empower staff to successfully carry out the goals outlined in the plan. Work with OHA/SHPO to keep aware of funding and training opportunities.

Action 1

Improve the review process for projects that might have an impact on historic resource:

- Have information for the public about what places and projects require review, and criteria and how to apply
- Create a GIS overlay of AHRS sites onto GIS map of Sitka, and maintain restricted access, so that this map, and the Inventory, are restricted to personnel who need it

Action 2

Develop a packet or kit for new members of the Sitka Historic Preservation Commission that includes training in the law, goals, and methods of historic preservation

Action 3

Obtain CLG grants for training in historic preservation by CBS staff and commission members

Action 4

Develop, or adopt, procedures for what to do in case of encountering historic or cultural resources or human remains, that includes notification of Sitka Tribe of Alaska, and awareness of places and situations where this is more likely. Ensure this is given to City employees and contractors, to members of the public getting building permits, and available to the general public

Action 5

Sponsor programs, or encourage City staff and SHPC members to participate in cultural programs, to raise awareness of Sitka's many cultural and ethnic communities and their histories

Action 6

Update if needed Sitka's street naming policy, and look at a procedure for using Native language names

Action 7

Reach out to Sitka's under-represented communities to fill seats on the SHPC

Action 8

Conduct a periodic review of all policies, programs, and documents in relation to historic

preservation to maintain standards of operation

Action 9

In order to create a sustainable tourist destination, communities cannot allow new development to shape community character. Develop voluntary design guidelines for new construction in historic neighborhoods and downtown that will retain their character

Goal Four

EDUCATE AND ENGAGE THE PUBLIC AND STUDENTS IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Historic preservation helps maintain the beauty, vibrancy, and livability of communities, connects people to the past and to one another, and fosters a sense of belonging and community pride. Old structures and historic sites reflect history on a human scale, revealing insights into the cultures and traditions that shaped our society. Historic buildings provide a tangible link to the past that everyone can experience, instilling a vital sense of stability and continuity.

Restoring buildings is usually more environmentally friendly as well as more cost-effective than building new ones. Replacement wastes the materials of the original buildings, requires new raw materials to replace them, and uses additional transport energy for both demolition and new construction.

The SHPC can help educate the public about the benefits of historic preservation, about how to do it, and connect the public to technical and monetary resources such as grants and tax incentives.

Historic preservation provides a wealth of educational opportunities across numerous disciplines. Students can learn real-world lessons in history, and in mathematics, sociology, environmental studies, urban planning, economics, and building crafts. By actively participating in preservation efforts, students, teachers, and community partners gain a deeper understanding of the importance of conserving and protecting our historical heritage. The diverse settings in which historic preservation takes place allow learners to engage with the subject in hands-on, practical ways that reinforce their academic education.

Action 1

Put technical resources online for the public about the review process for building permits, links to resources for historic preservation, guidelines for what to do if they encounter cultural materials or human remains, and on historic preservation grants and tax credits

Action 2

Promote surveys, restoration, preservation, rehabilitation, interpretation, stabilization for historic and cultural resources, and stewardship of traditional cultural properties and archaeological sites, and Nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, by having information available on how to do this

Action 3

Promote and share information about Sitka’s historic resources, with links to history and history education resources on the CBS website or the Sitka Historical Society website, for the use of students and the public Encourage the development of educational programs about the historic, architectural, archaeological and cultural resources of Sitka.

Action 4

Work with schools, museums and history organizations to teach the community’s history through the power of place, by using historic sites in educational programs. Organize a workshop for teachers to explain how heritage education based on local resources can enrich the learning process.

Action 5

Work with community groups to celebrate historic sites and historic preservation in Sitka

through special events at holidays and awards or recognition for historic preservation programming or projects Work with other local entities such as the Sitka Historical Society and the Sitka Tribe of Alaska to foster community awareness of historic preservation efforts

Action 6

Encourage students and the public to volunteer in historic preservation as part of educational and civic programs

Action 7

Work with NPS or other partners to offer training in historic preservation or the use of historic resources in education and other programs

Goal Five

PROMOTE HERITAGE TOURISM

Heritage tourism is an economically beneficial aspect of historic preservation. Heritage travelers tend to spend more, participate in more activities, and stay longer than other tourists. An authentic experience of the people and history of a place creates lasting memories.

Action 1

Encourage promotion of historic resources to visitors, such as walking tours and maps that showcase Sitka historic resources, with awards or recognition of programs or promotions

Action 2

Share information on CBS website or by partnering with Visit Sitka about Sitka’s historic and cultural resources, and the benefits of preservation for the visitor industry, the connection between sustainable heritage tourism and the careful maintenance of an area’s historic character and authenticity and how the values of authenticity and engaging in a place’s history are part of Tourism Best Practices

Goal Six

AMEND AND UPDATE CURRENT CBS HISTORIC PRESERVATION ORDINANCE

Action 1

Obtain a CLG grant to update the current ordinance to include a local register and policies associated with the protection, management, and promotion of Sitka’s cultural resources.



Figure 7.

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