



# Register of Very Special Places

A PROJECT OF TRADITIONAL ARTS IN UPSTATE NEW YORK

## TAUNY TIPS FOR DOCUMENTATION

### Taking Architectural Photographs

Adapted Courtesy of David Ames's "A Primer on Architectural Photography and the Photo Documentation of Historic Structures" *University of Delaware*

#### The Essential Views

The purpose of photographic documentation of historic structures is to preserve as much visual information about a structure in **as few photographs as possible**. The photographer must identify the views that reveal the most information about a structure. In looking for that view, you need to think about the attributes of a building: overall shape, size, and major architectural elements such as windows, doors, construction materials, and architectural ornamentation. Photographs often directly indicate construction material [log, masonry, or frame, etc.]. They also suggest certain attributes of the building or its uses. The distribution of doors and windows, for example, can suggest the interior floor plan. A single photograph can include most of these elements.

If you were allowed only one photograph to document a historic structure, what would it be? **The best choice would be a perspective showing the front and one side of the building, when taken from a position 45 degrees from the front.** When framing the building in the viewfinder, be sure that the entire building is visible including the point where the building meets the ground and without clipping off the peak of the roof or chimney. Although this sounds obvious, beginning photographers are often seduced by buildings and attracted by interesting details such as carpenter cut jigsaw porches, pointed Gothic windows, and Greek Revival columns. Unfortunately, the resulting pictures sometimes fail to record a view showing the entire structure. To avoid this problem, include the surroundings of the building, its site, and landscape context. As the subject of the photograph, the building should occupy about 75 percent of the picture area, leaving the surrounding 25 percent of the frame to show visual information about the context of the building.

#### The Seven Essential Photographs:

1. The front and one side
2. The rear and one side
3. The front elevation
4. Environmental view showing the building as part of its larger landscape
5. Interior view, showing major features of the building
6. Major elements of the building, including doors, windows, additions
7. Details such as materials and hardware



### Illustration #1

If you were allowed only one photograph to document a historic structure, the best choice would be a perspective showing the front and one side of the building. *This view is of the front [or south] and west sides of the Cooks Corners one-room schoolhouse [Pierrepont], now the meeting room for the Cooks Corners Community Club. As long as anyone locally can remember, the schoolhouse has been painted white with dark green trim.*



### Illustration #2

The second photograph should be a perspective of the rear and other side of the building. These two perspective shots now comprehensively document the exterior of the structure. *This second view is of the opposite side of the schoolhouse, the north and east. In the foreground is the current woodsbed, which was the original school room, built sometime between 1861 and 1867. The larger addition, which now functions as a meeting room, was built in 1904.*



### Illustration #3

The third photograph should document what architects call the “front elevation.” An elevation is drawing to scale of the side, front, or rear of a building. Projecting features such as window and door moldings, window sills, steps, and eaves are all rendered as if they were totally flat. An elevation photograph shows the true proportions of one side of a building. Because that side is parallel to the film plane—taken straight on from the front of the structure—approximate measurements can be taken from the photograph. In fact, measured drawings can be taken from a carefully controlled elevation photograph shot with a view camera. *This view is of the front façade of the building, facing south. It shows the relationship in size and placement of the windows and front door and the privy wing at the left rear of the building.*



### Illustration #4

We recommend an environmental view showing the building as part of its larger landscape. This will be a wide shot that includes trees or shrubs, at least portions of other structures if they are nearby, and a sense of its location related to the road or street. *This photo was taken from the ninety-degree intersection of Wilson Road [to the left] and Orebed Road [to the right], about 150 feet from the building. Note several old maple trees around the schoolhouse, the spacious yard, and the blue spruce tree in the foreground, which the community planted and now uses for its annual Memory Tree lighting in the Christmas season.*



### Illustration #5

Next photograph the major elements of the building, including doors, windows, additions, and lastly move in close for details, including materials and hardware. If planning to take more than four photographs, first carefully study the building and make a list of those things that should be photographed. Rarely will it take more than fifteen photographs to adequately document the exterior of a building. *This first view shows the exterior of the woodshed—the original structure—with the privy or toilet wing addition, the other of the interior of the woodshed as it appears today.*



### Illustration #6

What about interiors? First, identify the major space, room, or area in the building and then the way the other spaces are organized. Interior photographs should yield information about the floor plan of a building. Some structures, such as hangars, barns, and some industrial buildings, are architectural shells enclosing a major space. For such a structure, the first photograph would be taken from a corner opposite the main entrance and shot diagonally across the space. As with exteriors, the second photograph should be taken from the opposite corner, or should document an important element of the interior.



*The first view is of the southwest corner of the interior of the schoolhouse as it appears today, showing the front entrance door, the extra high windows on the west side of the building which were probably installed when this addition was built in 1904 to give better natural lighting for school days, and the wood heating stove. The second view is of the northeast corner, with the original blackboards and portrait of George Washington still in place. Both photos were taken in 2003 by Martha Cooper, when community members were gathered for a regular winter pedro party, a card game still popular in rural communities in the area.*

Most interiors of residential structures, for example, are laid out in hierarchical order from the most important, most formal, more elaborate room, to the plainer more functional rooms. First, determine the order of importance and then begin to photograph the rooms. To gain information on the floor plan, set up the camera to shoot toward the main doorway, if possible, with the door open to reveal the spaces and rooms beyond. A three-view sequence might include the entry hall, showing how rooms open off of it, the main formal room, and a functional working space such as the kitchen. Three or four views should be sufficient to document the significant elements of the interior, rarely more than seven or eight.

### Illustration #7

If you find details of the building—exterior or interior—that may be of particular interest as part of a record of its uses, photograph them as well. This could be specific furniture, signage, hardware, lighting fixtures, or other artifacts. *The first shot here is of details of the raised seam metal roof on the schoolhouse—popular on rural buildings in the area—and of the wooden enclosure for the ventilation pipes from the two toilets below. The second picture illustrates the concrete ledge that is the foundation wall all around the main front room of the schoolhouse. As it extends about 4 inches from the upper wall, “walking the wall” has always been a favorite childhood game for local residents. Some remember it as a common activity at recess during their school days.*



To say that a building can be well documented with seven photographs may sound hard to believe for individuals who shoot a 36-exposure roll of 35 mm. film or a couple of dozen digital images on an outing. But, the purpose of photographic documentation is to be as complete yet as succinctly as possible. The sequence of views described here can be used for nearly all photographic documentation of buildings, including the method recommended by the National Register of Historic Places. Finally, when approaching a building, remember that probably only one photograph of the building will ever be published. In choosing the view to photograph, the main question to ask yourself is what one view yields the most information about the structure?