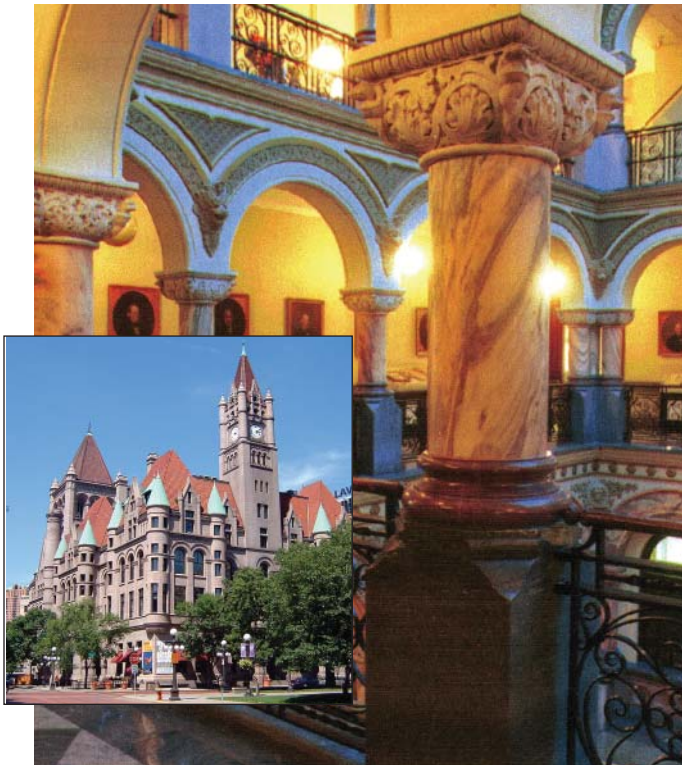
The Historic Surplus Property Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Technical Preservation Services

The Historic Surplus Property Program enables state, county, and local governments to obtain historic buildings once used by the Federal government at no cost, and adapt them for new uses.

Through the National Park Service's Historic Surplus Property Program, which is administered in partnership with the U.S. General Services Administration, historic buildings once used for Federal purposes can be transferred at no cost to state and local governments or other eligible political subdivisions. Under this program, historic properties—whether they contain one building or a complex of functionally related buildings—have been adapted and preserved in cities, suburbs, and rural areas nationwide. These historic properties are physical reminders of our nation's diverse heritage and reflect our Federal history—from fortifications for national defense and facilities used to mint currency, to structures that aided seafarers in navigation. They are often in prime locations, such as downtowns, waterfronts or scenic areas.



What is historic surplus property?

When Federally-owned buildings that are historic, such as lighthouses, military bases, office buildings, and customs houses, are no longer needed by the Federal government, the property is declared surplus by the General Services Administration. In the case of military base closures, surplus determinations are made by the U.S. Department of Defense. To be eligible for this program, the Federal property must be listed in, or eligible for listing in, the National Register of Historic Places, maintained by the National Park Service.

Who is eligible to acquire historic surplus property?

States, counties, municipalities, and similar governmental entities are eligible to acquire Federal surplus properties that are historic. Private and not-for-profit organizations cannot acquire property under this program, but they are permitted to enter into long-term leases with recipients of historic surplus properties, provided the lease is approved by the National Park Service.

How may historic surplus properties be used?

Properties transferred under this program may be adapted for new uses. The program does not require that properties be preserved as "monuments" or "museums," although these are allowable uses. Past transfers, for example, have permitted recipients to create offices, community centers, commercial facilities, and housing. A new use is limited only to the extent that the associated rehabilitation meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Historic surplus properties can also be leased and developed as income-producing commercial ventures. In certain instances, developers can also take advantage of Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives (see Grove Arcade example in this brochure). Recipients of historic surplus properties must commit the funds necessary to preserve and maintain the property in perpetuity.

(Inset) The monumental U.S. Post Office, Courthouse and Customs House Building in St. Paul, Minnesota, was built circa 1902. Transferred to Ramsey County, the building provides a prominent location for numerous arts-related organizations. Credit: Mike Hicks, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Ornamental ironwork and arcades are used to articulate the upper floors of the atrium at the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse in Rochester, New York. Transferred to the City of Rochester, the imposing edifice, which dates to 1891, serves as City Hall today. Credit: City of Rochester, New York

The Town of Watertown, Massachusetts, acquired the stately Commanding Officer's Quarters through this program. The building, constructed circa 1865, is rented out for meetings, parties and other events befitting the property.
Credit: Town of Watertown, Massachusetts

How Properties Are Transferred

When properties are declared excess to the needs of their respective Federal agencies,they are first screened for potential use by other Federal agencies. If there are no Federal agency recipients, the properties are declared surplus and are then reviewed for a variety of state, county, or local public uses, or they may be considered for public sale. Authorized under the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended, the Historic Surplus Property Program is but one mechanism used by the General Services Administration to dispose of Federal surplus property (note: "historic monument" is the statutory name for "historic surplus property"). Similarly, the Department of Defense is disposing of military bases under the authority of base closure and realignment laws.

What type of assistance does the National Park Service provide?

When a potential applicant (state or local government) becomes aware of an available historic surplus property, an expression of interest must be submitted to the appropriate property disposal office of the General Services Administration, or the appropriate military branch for base closure properties. If, after this initial step in the process, it is determined the property will be transferred under the

Historic Surplus Property Program, a formal application must be developed by the eligible applicant and submitted to the appropriate regional office of the National Park Service. The National Park Service helps government agencies develop applications, ensuring that the historic properties will be adequately preserved. In the final step of the transfer process, the National Park Service makes a formal recommendation to the disposing agency (either the General Services Administration or the Department of Defense), which makes the final decision whether to approve the property transfer and prepares the deed when the transfer is approved. Properties transferred under this program must be used in accordance with the terms of the transfer in perpetuity, although these terms may be amended by mutual agreement of the National Park Service and the recipient. Once a property is transferred, the National Park Service is responsible for monitoring the property to ensure that it is maintained and protected.

What is included in the application to acquire historic surplus property?

The primary component of the application to acquire a historic surplus property is the "Program of Preservation and Utilization," which includes three major sections: a preservation plan, a use plan, and a financial plan. All changes to historic properties must be approved by the National Park Service in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

Begun circa 1824, the pentagonal-plan Fort Adams is situated in Newport, Rhode Island, on the Narragansett Bay. Built of shale and Maine granite and regarded as a milestone in coastal fort construction at the time, Fort Adams was conveyed to the state and offers interpretive programs for the public. Credit: Billy Black, Newport, Rhode Island

Built between 1854 and 1864 as barracks for the Spanish infantry, the Cuartel de Ballaja in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, was conveyed to the commonwealth for public use. It houses a museum and state offices. Credit: Frank Miele, National Park Service, Southeast Region

How can the preservation and maintenance of historic surplus properties be financed?

Preservation and maintenance work on historic surplus properties can be financed through governmental appropriations and revenue bonds, leases directly to tenants, leases to developers who undertake rehabilitation work, Federal grants, and admission fees charged to visitors.

Are any restrictions placed on properties transferred under this program?

Properties transferred under the Historic Surplus Property Program must be used according to the terms of the transfer in perpetuity, although these terms may be amended by mutual agreement. Any proposed changes to the property must be approved by the National Park Service. Following the transfer, the National Park Service monitors compliance with the terms of the transfer by making periodic site inspections and reviewing reports that grantees must submit biannually.

Developers who lease properties from recipients of historic surplus properties may be eligible to take advantage of Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives.

The Grove Arcade
Reviving the Public Market

The Grove Arcade demonstrates how the Historic Surplus Property Program can be used to spur public-private partnerships that foster economic redevelopment and the preservation of significant historic properties.

Built as a public market, the Grove Arcade has been a landmark in Asheville, North Carolina, since it opened in 1929. Designed in a Neo-Tudor and Gothic style with richly detailed terra cotta, the building—with over 260,000 square feet—is Asheville's largest structure. In 1976, the Grove Arcade was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

From the time of its opening in 1929 until 1942, the Grove Arcade was a center of commercial and civic life in Asheville. During World War II, the Arcade was used by the Federal government for the war effort. At the war's conclusion, it remained in Federal ownership and eventually was reconfigured to serve as the headquarters for the National Climatic Data Center. When the Climatic Center moved to a new facility in 1994, the Grove Arcade was declared surplus property.

The Grove Arcade in Asheville, North Carolina, features elaborate terra cotta detailing. Transferred to the City of Asheville, this grand building has been rehabilitated into a successful multiple-use facility.
Credit: John Warner, Asheville, North Carolina

The interior of the Grove Arcade includes glazed storefronts, recessed mezzanines with elaborate railings, and expansive gabled skylights.
Credit: John Warner, Asheville, North Carolina

Determined to preserve this building, residents of Asheville began to explore ways in which this National Register property might be returned to its original use. In order to convert the Grove Arcade into a mixed-use development and return the building to its former splendor, the City of Asheville acquired this property through the National Park Service's Historic Surplus Property Program. The City subsequently entered into a long-term lease arrangement with the Grove Arcade Public Market Foundation, a not-for-profit corporation that rehabilitated the ground floor of the building as a public market. The Foundation, in turn, formed a partnership with a for-profit developer, and this led to a major rehabilitation of the remaining two-thirds of the property for shops, restaurants, offices, and apartments. To help finance this large-scale project, the Foundation and the developer took advantage of the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives Program, which offers a tax credit equal to 20% of the total eligible amount spent on rehabilitating an income-producing historic building. Today, this successful project encompasses a rich blend of compatible uses—most of which have public access—housed in an environment that preserves a highly significant building for future generations.