GIS as a Tool for Historic Preservation Planning: Lessons from Newtown Township, Pennsylvania

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ABSTRACT:

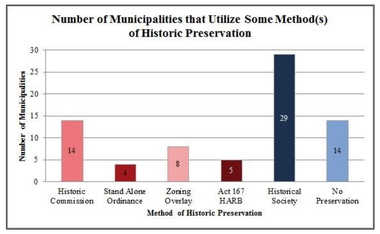
Historic resources are an integral part of the culture and history of local communities. Preserving historic assets is central to the local planning process. In Pennsylvania local governments are responsible for historic preservation planning. While some townships have strict laws protecting historic resources, other townships have no regulatory framework and important assets are at risk to demolition and permanent loss. Newtown Township, Delaware County, Pennsylvania, does not currently have legal protections for historic resources. During the 1990's Newtown Township face a housing and development boom and experienced the demolition of homes, barns and other buildings that were one hundred or more years old. Established in 1681, Newtown Township is steeped in early colonial American history, and the demolition of these buildings was a devastating loss to the cultural geography of the township. Currently, there are one hundred twelve township-designated historic sites, four of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The purpose of this research is to investigate the potential utilization of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) as a tool to promote and engage the public in the preservation of the historic resources in Newtown Township. A case study is presented where data is exported to GoogleEarth with pictures and videos of the historic resources and is accessed through the Newtown Square Historical Preservation Society website. Promotion of historical resources with GIS technologies has the potential to bring history into the hands of the public, engaging them on the importance of preservation and advocating for regulatory protections.

Historic Preservation in Newtown Township, Delaware County

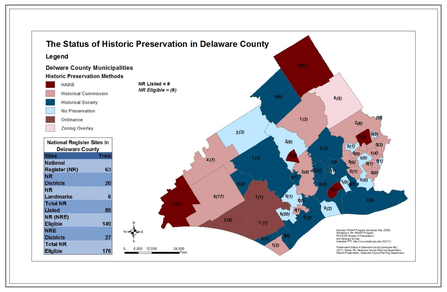
Purpose

- Investigate the utilization of GIS as a tool to document historic resources in the township and further pursue preservation of those resources.

Historic Preservation in Delaware County, PA



- Act 167- Historic Districts
- Act 247- Municipal Planning Code
- Historic Commission
- Historical Societies



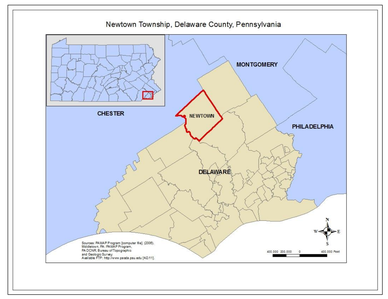
- 49 Municipalities
- 29 Historical Societies
- 14 Municipalities without Preservation
- 89 National Register Sites
- 176 Eligible National Register Sites

Newtown Township, Delaware County

- Incorporated 1681
- Oldest township in Delaware County
- "first inland town west of Philadelphia
- Welsh Quakers
- 1700's farming community
- 1800's mills

Newtown Today

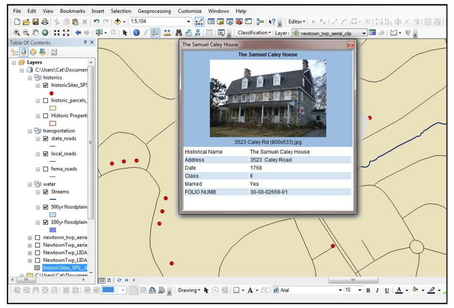
- 1950's rural to suburban
- 1990's big housing boom
- Demolition of old farmsteads



Newtown Square Historical Society

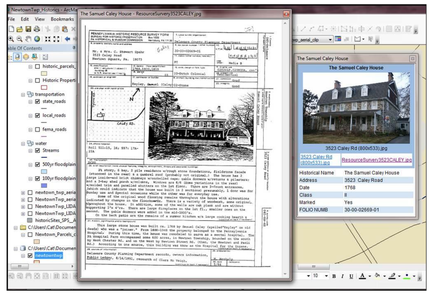
- Established in 1984
- Guardians of Township history
- Work to engage and educate residents
- Developed a Historic Preservation Ordinance in 2003
- Ordinance tabled in Fall 2003 at Supervisors Meeting

GIS: Preserving Newtown Township's History

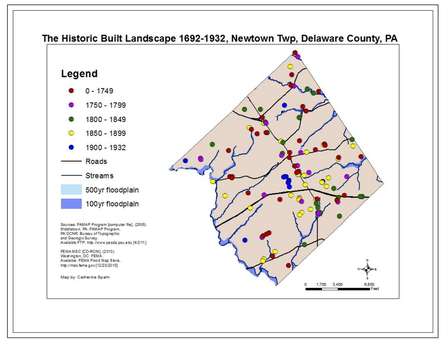


- Base map
- Geocoded resources
- Joined to tax parcels
- Added attachments
- Export to KML
- ESRI ArcServer

- Connects spatial data to attribute data
- Cost effective
- Informed decisions
- New analysis
- Web base applications



Challenges in Historic Preservation In Newtown Township



- Records accuracy and historic determination
- Balancing privacy and public interests
- Political atmosphere