

**City of Biloxi, Mississippi**  
***Preserve America* Community Designation Application**

**4. Designation Criteria and Needed Documentation**

**A community will qualify for designation as a *Preserve America* community if:**

- **Community has supported (within the last three years) a historic or cultural preservation project that promotes heritage tourism or otherwise fosters economic vitality. The project must have involved a public private partnership between government entities and at least one civic association, non-profit organization or business enterprise.**

As stated in its *Preserve America* Presidential Award application, the City of Biloxi has made a strong commitment to developing a heritage tourism program by supporting projects like the construction of the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, the expansions of the Mardi Gras Museum and the Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum and the restoration of the Biloxi Lighthouse.

One excellent example of the City of Biloxi's promotion of its historic resources is the restoration of the 1929 Saenger Theatre. Acquired by the City of Biloxi in 1975 and restored as part of the Bicentennial celebration, the Saenger Theatre is home to many performing arts organizations on the Gulf Coast, including the Gulf Coast Symphony Orchestra, Coast Performing Arts and several theatre groups. Owned and operated by the City of Biloxi, over 40,000 people enjoy live music, dance and drama each year at the historic theatre.

The City of Biloxi recently unveiled the 2.5 million dollar restoration of the Saenger Theatre. The restoration process began in 1995 with the development of a Master Plan. The goal of the restoration was to return the theatre to its original appearance while allowing for improvements for modern productions, such as sound systems, lighting and acoustics. Another key element to the restoration was improved access for the disabled. Plans included additional handicapped restrooms facilities, increased number of handicapped accessible seating and improvements to hearing assistance devices.

As a kickoff to the project, the original vertical neon sign was restored in 1997, signaling the rebirth of the historic theatre. The exterior stabilization of the building was completed in 2000. In addition repairing the roof and brick walls, this phase of the restoration also addressed the electrical and mechanical systems. The next phase of the project addressed the improvement and expansion of the restrooms.

The final phase of the project brought the auditorium back to its 1929 splendor. The original paint finishes, including tiffany glazing, marbleization and wood graining, were meticulously recreated. The ceiling, which had been replaced with lowered acoustical tile, now features the original stencil border and painted medallion around the exquisite crystal chandelier.

The City of Biloxi was fortunate to have many partners in the restoration process. In addition to city funds, money for the project was secured from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant program, the Mississippi Arts Commission through the Building Fund for the Arts and the Harrison County Board of Supervisors. The corporate community was instrumental in completing the project. Grand Casino Biloxi sponsored a performance of the Russian orchestra Klassika to fund the restoration of the vertical sign. Beau Rivage Casino and Resort provided assistance throughout the project, sponsoring a “Chair-ity” Auction at the casino where local artists decorated fun and creative chairs for auction to raise money and bringing in Porgy and Bess as part of Black History Month celebrations to benefit the restoration. Casino Magic Biloxi underwrote the grand reopening of the theatre in November 2003. Serving as restoration committee for the project was the Friends of the Saenger, a non-profit advisory community group dedicated to the continued preservation of the theatre. The Friends of the Saenger Theatre launched a capital campaign entitled “Musical Chairs”, which allowed patrons of the theatre to sponsor a new seat.

This multiphase project, which involved many partners to accomplish the goal of restoring the historic theatre for use as a performing arts center for the community, demonstrates the City of Biloxi’s long-term commitment to historic preservation.

- **The governing body of the community has adopted a resolution indicating its commitment to the preservation of its heritage assets.**

See enclosed resolution adopted by the Biloxi City Council.

- **The community meets at least five of the criteria outlined below (with at least one from each specified category).**

- **Category I: Discovering Heritage through Historic Places**

- ♣ **An ongoing, publicly available inventory of historic properties;**

The City of Biloxi began the process of inventorying its historic resources in 1975. These records were updated and expanded in 1998 with the assistance of a Certified Local Government grant-in-aid from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. The survey now contains over 1,000 buildings dating from the early 1800s through the 1930s. These records form the basis of research for “The Buildings of Biloxi: An Architectural Survey”. First published in 1976, the book was updated and republished in 1999 as part of Biloxi’s Tricentennial Celebration. These records are available for the public.

**♣ A community-supported museum interpretive facility archive or local history records collection;**

The City of Biloxi operates several municipal museums, including the historic house museums the Old Brick House and Tullis-Toledano Manor, the Biloxi Lighthouse and the Mardi Gras Museum, as well as the Saenger Theatre for the Performing Arts. The City of Biloxi also operates the Biloxi Visitor Center, located on the Town Green in the historic Brielmaier House, which assists 37,000 visitors to Biloxi each year. The Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum and the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art are located in city buildings and received substantial annual financial support. The Biloxi Public Library holds the extensive local archives and is available to the public for research.

**♣ Opportunities for children to learn about local heritage in the schools, through either established curriculum or special outreach activities.**

The City of Biloxi works with local schools to educate children about the importance of historic preservation. During Mississippi History Week in May of 2002, all fourth grade students received a preservation coloring book and a recommended curriculum of preservation related activities. Mayor A.J. Holloway presented certificates of achievement to students who completed the preservation program.

The City of Biloxi also conducts preservation related programs for children during the summer months. A historic preservation component was added to the Summer Playground Program, which is open to all residents of Biloxi. Funded in part through a Certified Local Government grant-in-aid, the program included field trips to local museums and historic sites and a preservation-related craft activity, such as constructing a stained glass window out of colored paper. The children also received a coloring book and handout on the history of local landmarks. 321 children participated in the program in 2003.

Funded by grants from the City of Biloxi, the Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum and the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art both host summer programs related to Biloxi's cultural heritage. Children attending the Sea-n-Sail Camp have the opportunity to learn first hand about Biloxi's maritime history through fishing expeditions, sailing trips on the museum's two 65-foot wooden schooners and a model boat building competition. Young artists at the Mud Dauber's Camp learn about the legacy of George Ohr, the Mad Potter of Biloxi, whose intricate pots and vases are world-renown. Activities include learning to throw, glaze and fire pottery.

- **Category 2: Protecting Historic Resources**

- ♣ **A local governmental body, such as a board or commission, charged with leading historic preservation activities within the community;**

The Architectural and Historical Review Commission is a nine-member body which meets twice monthly to review projects for compliance with design guidelines. The commission reviews projects involving Biloxi Landmarks, Biloxi Landmark sites and any property within one of the City of Biloxi's historic districts.

In addition to its duties as a design review board, the Architectural and Historical Review Commission promotes historic preservation through educational outreach programs for the community. One excellent example of this outreach is the Preservation 101 program. The Preservation 101 lecture and field trip series began in September 2000 and concluded in May 2001. Eight lectures, twenty-two field trips and a graduation celebration were held. Over 350 people participated in the series with a total attendance of 1,086.

Participants were given the newly revised architectural survey *The Buildings of Biloxi* at the first lecture. Nationally recognized experts in the field of historic preservation presented lectures on a variety of topics, including the economics of preservation, preservation advocacy and the National Register process. Field trips were held on Saturdays and Sundays and included topics such as architectural styles, historic neighborhoods, adaptive use of historic buildings and historic trees.

Funded in part through a Certified Local Government grant-in-aid, Preservation 101 was a collaborative effort, involving the City of Biloxi, county, state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations, local businesses, civic organizations, churches, synagogues and homeowners. Significant in-kind contributions were provided by the business community, including lodging and dinners for speakers and the graduation celebration at the historic White House Hotel.

- ♣ **A historic preservation review ordinance and volunteer or professional staff to implement it.**

The City of Biloxi adopted a historic preservation review ordinance in 1985. The Architectural and Historical Review Commission is staffed by personnel from the Planning Division, including a Secretary, Planning Inspector, Executive Planner and Historical Administrator. 6 historic districts, 127 Biloxi Landmarks and 12 Biloxi Landmark sites are protected by the preservation ordinance. The Architectural and Historical Review Commission reviewed 67 cases in 2003 for compliance with design guidelines. As a designated Certified Local Government, the City of Biloxi and the Architectural and Historical Review Commission work closely with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History to fulfill its preservation mission.

- **Category 3: Promoting Historic Assets**

- **A local heritage tourism program or active participation in a regional program, with such promotional material as a walking/driving trail or tour itinerary, map of historic resources, etc;**

The City of Biloxi promotes the concept of a “museum without walls”, encouraging visitors to explore the history of Biloxi through walking and driving tours, outdoor markers with text, graphics and photographs on important aspects of the city’s history, and excursion to the many museums that focus on different aspects of Biloxi’s heritage.

- **A regularly scheduled heritage observance or event;**

The City of Biloxi has hosted events in recognition of historic preservation week since 1975. An example of these events includes the graduation of Preservation 101 class in May of 2001. The City of Biloxi hosted a month-long program in May of 2002, with a variety of preservation-related activities including lectures, picnics, tours and schooner sails. In May 2003 the City of Biloxi celebrated Historic Preservation week with the opening of the Pleasant Reed House and groundbreaking for the Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art, a Frank Gehry-designed museum dedicated to the works of George Ohr, the Mad Potter of Biloxi, whose fanciful clay creations are world renown.

- **A historic preservation awards or recognition program.**

The City of Biloxi recognized 105 Biloxi Landmarks in May 2003 with the presentation of bronze plaques. These plaques, which feature a logo of the Biloxi Lighthouse and state the name and date of construction for the landmark, now identify Biloxi’s important historic resources.

**Written endorsements:**

See enclosed letters of endorsement.

**Participation in other nationwide preservation programs:**

The City of Biloxi is a Certified Local Government and works closely with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History on preservation-related issues. Biloxi is also a Main Street Community. The Main Street Manager position is funded by the City of Biloxi and the Main Street Biloxi offices are located in the Biloxi Visitor Center. The national importance of the work of George Ohr has been recognized by the Save America’s Treasure’s Program. The Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art has received funding through the United States Department of Transportation enhancement initiative for the construction of the new museum.