Museums that operate in historic buildings must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) depending on their status as state or local governmental entities (Title II)\(^2\) or public accommodations and commercial facilities (Title III).\(^3\)

Specific treatment of qualified historic buildings is provided for in the section of the ADA that directs the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board to issue guidelines, as follows.

Sec. 12204. Regulations by Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board

(a) Issuance of guidelines

Not later than 9 months after July 26, 1990, the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board shall issue minimum guidelines that shall supplement the existing Minimum Guidelines and Requirements for Accessible Design for purposes of subchapters II and III of this chapter.

(b) Contents of guidelines

The supplemental guidelines issued under subsection (a) of this section shall establish additional requirements, consistent with this chapter, to ensure that buildings, facilities, rail passenger cars, and vehicles are accessible, in terms of architecture and design, transportation, and communication, to individuals with disabilities.

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\(^1\) The author acknowledges that this outline benefits from and incorporates the work of Wyatt McKean, Legal Intern for the National Trust, Summer 2014. I am particularly grateful for Mr. McKean’s research and materials on accessible programming at historic sites.

\(^2\) 42 U.S.C.A. §§ 12131-12150 (West).

\(^3\) Id. §§ 12181-12189.
(c) Qualified historic properties

(1) In general

The supplemental guidelines issued under subsection (a) of this section shall include procedures and requirements for alterations that will threaten or destroy the historic significance of qualified historic buildings and facilities as defined in 4.1.7(1)(a) of the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards.

(2) Sites eligible for listing in National Register

With respect to alterations of buildings or facilities that are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under the National Historic Preservation Act [54 U.S.C. 300101 et seq., formerly 16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.] the guidelines described in paragraph (1) shall, at a minimum, maintain the procedures and requirements established in 4.1.7(1) and (2) of the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards.

(3) Other sites

With respect to alterations of buildings or facilities designated as historic under State or local law, the guidelines described in paragraph (1) shall establish procedures equivalent to those established by 4.1.7(1)(b) and (c) of the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards, and shall require, at a minimum, compliance with the requirements established in 4.1.7(2) of such standards.

These requirement have been incorporated into the regulations issued by the Department of Justice at 28 C.F.R.

Title II

Title II of the ADA applies to programs of state or local government (public entities). Generally, the basic requirement is that programs, when viewed in their entirety, must be readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities. The requirement does not dictate that existing facilities must be altered, but if they are used to provide the programs, the programs must be readily accessible. If existing facilities are altered, the alteration must comply with the ADA Standards for Accessible Design. For programs of state or local government that are historic preservation programs, a priority is placed on providing physical access because the experience of the historic place is integral to the program.

The relevant provisions of the regulations and Standards are provided below:

Title II Regulations relating to historic preservation

§ 35.104 Definitions.
For purposes of this part, the term—

**Historic preservation programs** means programs conducted by a public entity that have preservation of historic properties as a primary purpose.

**Historic properties** means those properties that are listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or properties designated as historic under State or local law.

**Subpart D – Program Accessibility**

§ 35.149 Discrimination prohibited.

Except as otherwise provided in § 35.150, no qualified individual with a disability shall, because a public entity's facilities are inaccessible to or unusable by individuals with disabilities, be excluded from participation in, or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any public entity.

§ 35.150 Existing facilities

(a) General. A public entity shall operate each service, program, or activity so that the service, program, or activity, when viewed in its entirety, is readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities. This paragraph does not—

(1) Necessarily require a public entity to make each of its existing facilities accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities;

(2) Require a public entity to take any action that would threaten or destroy the historic significance of an historic property [emphasis added]; or

(3) Require a public entity to take any action that it can demonstrate would result in a fundamental alteration in the nature of a service, program, or activity or in undue financial and administrative burdens. In those circumstances where personnel of the public entity believe that the proposed action would fundamentally alter the service, program, or activity or would result in undue financial and administrative burdens, a public entity has the burden of proving that compliance with §35.150(a) of this part would result in such alteration or burdens. The decision that compliance would result in such alteration or burdens must be made by the head of a public entity or his or her designee after considering all resources available for use in the funding and operation of the service, program, or activity, and must be accompanied by a written statement of the reasons for reaching that conclusion. If an action would result in such an alteration or such burdens, a public entity shall take any other action that would not result in such an alteration or such burdens but would nevertheless ensure that individuals with disabilities receive the benefits or services provided by the public entity.
§ 35.150 Existing facilities

(b) Methods.

(3) Historic preservation programs. In meeting the requirements of § 35.150(a) in historic preservation programs, a public entity shall give priority to methods that provide physical access to individuals with disabilities. In cases where a physical alteration to an historic property is not required because of paragraph (a)(2) or (a)(3) of this section, alternative methods of achieving program accessibility include—

(i) Using audio-visual materials and devices to depict those portions of an historic property that cannot otherwise be made accessible;

(ii) Assigning persons to guide individuals with handicaps into or through portions of historic properties that cannot otherwise be made accessible; or

(iii) Adopting other innovative methods.

§ 35.151 New construction and alterations

(a) Design and construction.

(1) Each facility or part of a facility constructed by, on behalf of, or for the use of a public entity shall be designed and constructed in such manner that the facility or part of the facility is readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities, if the construction was commenced after January 26, 1992.

(2) Exception for structural impracticability.

(i) Full compliance with the requirements of this section is not required where a public entity can demonstrate that it is structurally impracticable to meet the requirements. Full compliance will be considered structurally impracticable only in those rare circumstances when the unique characteristics of terrain prevent the incorporation of accessibility features.

(ii) If full compliance with this section would be structurally impracticable, compliance with this section is required to the extent that it is not structurally impracticable. In that case, any portion of the facility that can be made accessible shall be made accessible to the extent that it is not structurally impracticable.

(iii) If providing accessibility in conformance with this section to individuals with certain disabilities (e.g., those who use wheelchairs) would be structurally impracticable, accessibility shall nonetheless be ensured to persons with other types of disabilities, (e.g., those who use crutches or who have sight, hearing, or mental impairments) in accordance with this section.

(b) Alterations.

(1) Each facility or part of a facility altered by, on behalf of, or for the use of a public entity in a manner that affects or could affect the usability of the facility or part of the facility shall, to the maximum extent feasible, be altered in such manner that the
altered portion of the facility is readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities, if the alteration was commenced after January 26, 1992.

(2) The path of travel requirements of § 35.151(b)(4) shall apply only to alterations undertaken solely for purposes other than to meet the program accessibility requirements of § 35.150.

(3) Alterations to historic properties shall comply, to the maximum extent feasible, with the provisions applicable to historic properties in the design standards specified in § 35.151(c).

(ii) If it is not feasible to provide physical access to an historic property in a manner that will not threaten or destroy the historic significance of the building or facility, alternative methods of access shall be provided pursuant to the requirements of § 35.150. [emphasis added]

(4) Path of travel. An alteration that affects or could affect the usability of or access to an area of a facility that contains a primary function shall be made so as to ensure that, to the maximum extent feasible, the path of travel to the altered area and the restrooms, telephones, and drinking fountains serving the altered area are readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities, including individuals who use wheelchairs, unless the cost and scope of such alterations is disproportionate to the cost of the overall alteration.

Explanation of historic preservation provisions in current regulations for Title II:

Section 35.151(b)(3) Alterations to historic facilities

The final rule renumbers the requirements for alterations to historic facilities enumerated in current § 35.151(d)(1) and (2) as § 35.151(b)(3)(i) and (ii). Currently, the regulation provides that alterations to historic facilities shall comply to the maximum extent feasible with section 4.1.7 of UFAS or section 4.1.7 of the 1991 Standards. See 28 CFR 35.151(d)(1). Section 35.151(b)(3)(i) of the final rule eliminates the option of using UFAS for alterations that commence on or after March 15, 2012. The substantive requirement in current § 35.151(d)(2)—that alternative methods of access shall be provided pursuant to the requirements of § 35.150 if it is not feasible to provide physical access to an historic property in a manner that will not threaten or destroy the historic significance of the building or facility—is contained in § 35.151(b)(3)(ii).


II-6.5000 Alterations to historic properties. Alterations to historic properties must comply with the specific provisions governing historic properties in ADAAG or UFAS, to the maximum extent feasible. Under those provisions, alterations should be done in full compliance with the alterations standards for other types of buildings. However, if following the usual standards would threaten or destroy the historic significance of a feature of the building, alternative standards may be used. The decision to use alternative
standards for that feature must be made in consultation with the appropriate historic advisory board designated in ADAAG or UFAS, and interested persons should be invited to participate in the decisionmaking process.

What are "historic properties?" These are properties listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or properties designated as historic under State or local law.

What are the alternative requirements? The alternative requirements for historic buildings or facilities provide a minimal level of access. For example --

1) An accessible route is only required from one site access point (such as the parking lot).

2) A ramp may be steeper than is ordinarily permitted.

3) The accessible entrance does not need to be the one used by the general public.

4) Only one accessible toilet is required and it may be unisex.

5) Accessible routes are only required on the level of the accessible entrance.

But what if complying with even these minimal alternative requirements will threaten or destroy the historic significance? In such a case, which is rare, the public entity need not make the structural changes required by UFAS or ADAAG. But, if structural modifications that comply with UFAS or ADAAG cannot be undertaken, the Department's regulation requires that "program accessibility" be provided.

ILLUSTRATION: A town owns a one-story historic house and decides to make certain alterations in it so that the house can be used as a museum. The town architect concludes that most of the normal standards for alterations can be applied during the renovation process without threatening or destroying historic features. There appears, however, to be a problem if one of the interior doors is widened, because historic decorative features on the door might be destroyed. The town architect consults the standards and determines that the appropriate historic body with jurisdiction over the particular historic home is the State Historic Preservation Officer. The architect then sets up a meeting with that officer, to which the local disability group and the designated title II coordinator are invited. At the meeting the participants agree with the town architect's conclusion that the normal alterations standards cannot be applied to the interior door. They then review the special alternative requirements, which require an accessible route throughout the level of the accessible entrance. The meeting participants determine that application of the alternative minimal requirements is likewise not possible. In this situation, the town is not required to widen the interior door. Instead, the town provides access to the program offered in that room by making available a video presentation of the items within the inaccessible room. The video can be viewed in a nearby accessible room in the museum.
Title III

Title III of the ADA applies to places of public accommodation. Museums are expressly included in the definition of places of public accommodations. The primary requirements that are relevant to historic buildings that may be used for a museum are that the museum must 1) remove barriers to accessibility that are readily achievable; and 2) if the museum is altering a place, the alterations must comply with the ADA Standards for Accessible Design. An alteration is not considered “readily achievable” if it would “threaten or destroy” a building or facility that is listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as historic under state or local law. If a proposed alteration to a qualified historic property that is necessary to comply with the ADA Standards for Accessible Design would “threaten or destroy” the historic property, the services may be provided through alternative means. The standard for “threaten or destroy” is generally applied in a manner that is considered the high end of an “adverse effect” under the provisions of section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, and a similar process of assessing the effect is used. The determination of whether a historic property will be threatened or destroyed should be made by the appropriate state historic preservation office. Even if a specific alteration is not required because it would threaten or destroy the historic significance of a qualified historic property, alternative means of providing the goods or services should be used.

The specific provisions of the regulations and the Standards for Accessible Design are excerpted below:

**Title III Regulations relating to historic preservation**

**Definitions**

*Place of public accommodation* means a facility operated by a private entity whose operations affect commerce and fall within at least one of the following categories –

…

(2) A restaurant, bar, or other establishment serving food or drink;

(3) A motion picture house, theater, concert hall, stadium, or other place of exhibition or entertainment;

(4) An auditorium, convention center, lecture hall, or other place of public gathering;

(5) A bakery, grocery store, clothing store, hardware store, shopping center, or other sales or rental establishment;

…

(8) A museum, library, gallery, or other place of public display or collection;

(9) A park, zoo, amusement park, or other place of recreation;…
§ 36.304 Removal of barriers.

(a) General. A public accommodation shall remove architectural barriers in existing facilities, including communication barriers that are structural in nature, where such removal is readily achievable, i.e., easily accomplishable and able to be carried out without much difficulty or expense.

(b) Examples. Examples of steps to remove barriers include, but are not limited to, the following actions —

1. Installing ramps;
2. Making curb cuts in sidewalks and entrances;
3. Repositioning shelves;
4. Rearranging tables, chairs, vending machines, display racks, and other furniture;
5. Repositioning telephones;
6. Adding raised markings on elevator control buttons;
7. Installing flashing alarm lights;
8. Widening doors;
9. Installing offset hinges to widen doorways;
10. Eliminating a turnstile or providing an alternative accessible path;
11. Installing accessible door hardware;
12. Installing grab bars in toilet stalls;
13. Rearranging toilet partitions to increase maneuvering space;
14. Insulating lavatory pipes under sinks to prevent burns;
15. Installing a raised toilet seat;
16. Installing a full-length bathroom mirror;
17. Repositioning the paper towel dispenser in a bathroom;
18. Creating designated accessible parking spaces;
19. Installing an accessible paper cup dispenser at an existing inaccessible water fountain;
20. Removing high pile, low density carpeting; or
21. Installing vehicle hand controls.

(g) Limitation on barrier removal obligations.

1. The requirements for barrier removal under § 36.304 shall not be interpreted to exceed the standards for alterations in subpart D of this part.
§ 36.305 Alternatives to barrier removal.

(a) General. Where a public accommodation can demonstrate that barrier removal is not readily achievable, the public accommodation shall not fail to make its goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, or accommodations available through alternative methods, if those methods are readily achievable.

(b) Examples. Examples of alternatives to barrier removal include, but are not limited to, the following actions –

(1) Providing curb service or home delivery;
(2) Retrieving merchandise from inaccessible shelves or racks;
(3) Relocating activities to accessible locations;

§ 36.402 Alterations.

(a) General.

(1) Any alteration to a place of public accommodation or a commercial facility, after January 26, 1992, shall be made so as to ensure that, to the maximum extent feasible, the altered portions of the facility are readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities, including individuals who use wheelchairs.

(2) An alteration is deemed to be undertaken after January 26, 1992, if the physical alteration of the property begins after that date.

(b) Alteration. For the purposes of this part, an alteration is a change to a place of public accommodation or a commercial facility that affects or could affect the usability of the building or facility or any part thereof.

(1) Alterations include, but are not limited to, remodeling, renovation, rehabilitation, reconstruction, historic restoration, changes or rearrangement in structural parts or elements, and changes or rearrangement in the plan configuration of walls and full-height partitions. Normal maintenance, reroofing, painting or wallpapering, asbestos removal, or changes to mechanical and electrical systems are not alterations unless they affect the usability of the building or facility.

(2) If existing elements, spaces, or common areas are altered, then each such altered element, space, or area shall comply with the applicable provisions of appendix A to this part.

(c) To the maximum extent feasible. The phrase "to the maximum extent feasible," as used in this section, applies to the occasional case where the nature of an existing facility makes it virtually impossible to comply fully with applicable accessibility standards through a planned alteration. In these
circumstances, the alteration shall provide the maximum physical accessibility feasible. Any altered features of the facility that can be made accessible shall be made accessible. If providing accessibility in conformance with this section to individuals with certain disabilities (e.g., those who use wheelchairs) would not be feasible, the facility shall be made accessible to persons with other types of disabilities (e.g., those who use crutches, those who have impaired vision or hearing, or those who have other impairments).

§ 36.405 Alterations: Historic preservation.

(a) Alterations to buildings or facilities that are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under the National Historic Preservation Act (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq) or are designated as historic under State or local law, shall comply to the maximum extent feasible with this part.

(b) If it is determined that it is not feasible to provide physical access to an historic property that is a place of public accommodation in a manner that will not threaten or destroy the historic significance of the building or the facility, alternative methods of access shall be provided pursuant to the requirements of subpart C of this part.

Explanation of historic preservation provisions in current regulations for Title III:

Section 36.405 Alterations: Historic Preservation

In the 1991 rule, the Department provided guidance on making alterations to buildings or facilities that are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under the National Historic Preservation Act or that are designated as historic under State or local law. That provision referenced the 1991 Standards. Because those cross-references to the 1991 Standards are no longer applicable, it is necessary in this final rule to provide new regulatory text. No substantive change in the Department's approach in this area is intended by this revision.

Excerpt from the ADA Standards for Accessible Design:

202.5 Alterations to Qualified Historic Buildings and Facilities. Alterations to a qualified historic building or facility shall comply with 202.3 and 202.4.

EXCEPTION: Where the State Historic Preservation Officer or Advisory Council on Historic Preservation determines that compliance with the requirements for accessible routes, entrances, or toilet facilities would threaten or destroy the historic significance of the building or facility, the exceptions for alterations to qualified historic buildings or facilities for that element shall be permitted to apply.
**Advisory 202.5 Alterations to Qualified Historic Buildings and Facilities**

**Exception.** State Historic Preservation Officers are State appointed officials who carry out certain responsibilities under the National Historic Preservation Act. State Historic Preservation Officers consult with Federal and State agencies, local governments, and private entities on providing access and protecting significant elements of qualified historic buildings and facilities. There are exceptions for alterations to qualified historic buildings and facilities for accessible routes (206.2.1 Exception 1 and 206.2.3 Exception 7); entrances (206.4 Exception 2); and toilet facilities (213.2 Exception 2). When an entity believes that compliance with the requirements for any of these elements would threaten or destroy the historic significance of the building or facility, the entity should consult with the State Historic Preservation Officer. If the State Historic Preservation Officer agrees that compliance with the requirements for a specific element would threaten or destroy the historic significance of the building or facility, use of the exception is permitted. Public entities have an additional obligation to achieve program accessibility under the Department of Justice ADA regulations. See 28 CFR 35.150. These regulations require public entities that operate historic preservation programs to give priority to methods that provide physical access to individuals with disabilities. If alterations to a qualified historic building or facility to achieve program accessibility would threaten or destroy the historic significance of the building or facility, fundamentally alter the program, or result in undue financial or administrative burdens, the Department of Justice ADA regulations allow alternative methods to be used to achieve program accessibility. In the case of historic preservation programs, such as an historic house museum, alternative methods include using audio-visual materials to depict portions of the house that cannot otherwise be made accessible. In the case of other qualified historic properties, such as an historic government office building, alternative methods include relocating programs and services to accessible locations. The Department of Justice ADA regulations also allow public entities to use alternative methods when altering qualified historic buildings or facilities in the rare situations where the State Historic Preservation Officer determines that it is not feasible to provide physical access using the exceptions permitted in Section 202.5 without threatening or destroying the historic significance of the building or facility. See 28 CFR 35.151(d).

The AccessAbility Office at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) provides a variety of resources for museum operators and historic properties including: the Design for Accessibility Guide and the Disability Symbols. Contact NEA about these and other resources at (202) 682-5532 or www.arts.gov.
Does the ADA require barrier removal in historic buildings? Yes, if it is readily achievable. However, the ADA takes into account the national interest in preserving significant historic structures. Barrier removal would not be considered "readily achievable" if it would threaten or destroy the historic significance of a building or facility that is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under the National Historic Preservation Act (16 U.S.C. 470, et seq.), or is designated as historic under State or local law.

ILLUSTRATION 1: The installation of a platform lift in an historic facility that is preserved because of its unique place in American architecture, or because it is one of few surviving examples of the architecture of a particular period, would not be readily achievable, if the installation of the lift would threaten or destroy architecturally significant elements of the building.

ILLUSTRATION 2: The installation of a ramp or lift in a facility that has historic significance because of events that have occurred there, rather than because of unique architectural characteristics, may be readily achievable, if it does not threaten or destroy the historic significance of the building and is within appropriate cost constraints.

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III-6.4000 Alterations: Historic preservation. Alterations to historic properties must comply with the historic property provisions of ADAAG, to the maximum extent feasible. Under those provisions, alterations should be done in full compliance with the alterations standards for other types of buildings. However, if following the usual standards would threaten or destroy the historic significance of a feature of the building, alternative standards may be used. The decision to use alternative standards for that feature must be made in consultation with the appropriate advisory board designated in ADAAG, and interested persons should be invited to participate in the decision-making process.

What are "historic properties"? These are properties that are listed or that are eligible for listing in the National Register or Historic Places, or properties designated as historic under State or local law.

What are the alternative requirements? The alternative requirements provide a minimal level of access. For example --

1) An accessible route is only required from one site access point (such as the parking lot).

2) A ramp may be steeper than is ordinarily permitted.

3) The accessible entrance does not need to be the one used by the general public.
4) Only one accessible toilet is required and it may be unisex.

5) Accessible routes are only required on the level of the accessible entrance.

But what if complying with even these minimal alternative requirements will threaten or destroy the historic significance? In such a case, which is rare, structural changes need not be made. Rather, alternative methods can be used to provide access, such as providing auxiliary aids or modifying policies.

ILLUSTRATION: A historic house is being altered to be used as a museum. The architect designing the project concludes that most of the normal standards for alterations can be applied during the renovation process without threatening or destroying historic features. There appears, however, to be a problem if one of the interior doors is widened, because historic decorative features on the door might be destroyed. After consulting ADAAG, the architect determines that the appropriate historic body with jurisdiction over the particular historic home is the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The architect sets up a meeting with the Council, to which a local disability group is invited.

At the meeting the participants agree with the architect's conclusion that the normal alterations standards cannot be applied to the interior door. They then review the special alternative requirements, which require an accessible entrance. The meeting participants determine that application of the alternative minimal requirements is likewise not possible.

In this situation, the museum owner is not required to widen the interior door. Instead, the owner modifies the usual operational policies and provides alternative access to the activities offered in the inaccessible room by making available a video presentation of the items within the inaccessible room. The video can be viewed in a nearby accessible room in the museum.

Decisions and Settlement Agreements.

Since the passage of the ADA, a handful of decisions have been issued regarding the application of the ADA to historic buildings.

See, e.g.:

Colorado Cross Disability Coalition v. Hermanson Family Limited Partnership I, 264 F.3d 999 (10th Cir. 2001)
In the past few years, DOJ has brought enforcement actions against several cultural or museum organizations, most of which have been settled out of court. The Attorney General has published settlement agreements with organizations related to their operations at several National Register-listed sites, including the following:


These settlement agreements provide additional guidance about the application of the ADA to historic properties and museum programs.