The distinctive shields designating properties of historic significance to Jefferson County identify more than 1,250 homes, buildings and sites around the county, with scores of others eligible for similar recognition. "We recognize the 'built history' of Jefferson County, and a marked property does not have to be 'significant' either architecturally or historically," according to the commission.

The Commission, established in 1971 by an act of the Alabama Legislature, promoted the cause of historic preservation and the documentation and protection of the historic resources of the City of Birmingham and Jefferson County. The group's focuses include the Historic Marker program, publications on Jefferson County history and the annual Thomas Jefferson Awards to individuals and groups who contribute to the understanding of local history or preservation.

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The Craftsman-Tudor Revival Coe House features a multi-gabled roof, open porch, and leaded and beveled glass in windows and doors. The house has a multi-faceted history, having been home to the Morningside Commune in the 1970s and later serving over 3,600 children under the auspices of the Alabama United Methodist Children’s Home before restoration as a private home in 1999.

The historic name given to a house or commercial structure is typically that of the first or longest-term occupant, or the name with which a building is most commonly associated historically. In the case of two historic occupancies, a hyphenated name is sometimes assigned. Because the marker is assigned to a structure rather than to an individual or business, the marker remains with the structure through subsequent owners. To be eligible, buildings should retain original shape and roofline and enough of the original exterior materials to reflect historic character and appearance. Critical features include masonry or frame wall material, windows, porches and decorative details. Interior changes or additions to the rear and hidden from public view generally do not compromise a structure’s eligibility.

The Historic Marker application, available from the ICHC Headquarters at 2100 First Avenue North or at www.jeffersonhistorical.org, requests the property’s Tax Parcel Identification Number, source for date of construction, listing and sources of names of original and subsequent long-term owners or occupants, copies of supporting documentation, including Board of Equalization field sheets and photographs. Current photographs, taken if possible from the same angle as any historic pictures, are also requested. Application fee is $125.

Completing the application for admission to the register is not overwhelming,” stresses Commission member Dr. Meredith Byram. “In most cases a homeowner can do all or most of the research by accessing old city directories and Board of Equalization files at the Downtown Public Library.” Field photographs of the house taken in the county wide reappraisals of 1938-1941 are crucial. Copies of the pictures must include the date that the historic pictures were taken. “We are interested in any supporting information, including stories from relatives or neighbors who have lived in the community for years,” Dr. Byram continues.

Linda Nelson adds that copies of architectural plans or references to a structure in local history books or from neighborhood newspaper clipping files in the library’s Southern History Department are valuable documents. She suggests tracking former owners through city directories, starting the search several years before presumed construction of a home, and following an ownership trail through the next several years and about every five or ten years thereafter. Cross-referenced city directories for Birmingham and Bessemer, going back to the 1880s, are housed in the library’s Southern History Department and also provide the names of spouses and occupances of owners. It can generally assumed that a house was constructed a year prior to the first directory inclusion.

A tip sheet with sources and strategies for researching Birmingham area houses and buildings is available from the ICHC Archives. Tax identification numbers, necessary to access Board of Equalization files, can be obtained by street address from the library’s Business Department. Additional resources include Birmingham Historical Society publications such as House Detective A Guide to Researching Birmingham Buildings and A Guide to Architectural Styles in Birmingham Homes.

Byram and Nelson point out that the historic designation carries restrictions,” says Birmingham Public Library archivist James Baggett. “Instead, it is hoped that having a marker will encourage homeowners to understand, respect and maintain the integrity of the historic character of a property.” RealSouth’s Sue Moody, who specializes in marketing historic properties, concurs, “People love to live in a house that represents a piece of history.”

For more information, contact the Jefferson County Historical Commission at 205.324.0988 (www.jeffersonhistorical.org), the Birmingham Public Library Archives at 205.226.3630 (www.bplonline.org), or the Birmingham Historical Society at 205.251.1880 (www.bhsistorical.org).