



## Image Description Procedures

This document will provide guidelines for describing images that will be added to the LCP image archive. Image description is a key part of the program both for its education value allowing the public to understand what they are seeing in an image and for its value as a finding aid allowing site users to search for images containing objects they want to see.

The Landscape Change Program archive is made up of images obtained from many different collections, which include a wide range of subjects. There are images of mountain landscapes, city streets and churches. There are images of quarrying, waterfalls, eroding landscapes and the clear cutting of forests. There are pictures of floods and barns and barns in floods. Descriptions of these images are an essential part of the LCP entries. In addition to providing a written account of what is visible in the image a thorough description allows an image to be identified within the database. Along with keywords (described in LCP Procedures for Selecting Keywords), descriptions enable an image to be “searchable”. By providing an accurate written account of what is visible within an image, the image can be located when a user searches a specific word that is part of the description. The issue here is that we are searching for an image, a visual representation, using only words. So captions that are well written and inclusive lets you find images that otherwise might be tough to find using date, location or even keywords. One of the best suggestions we have heard for thinking about how to describe an image is to imagine your self communicating the contents of an image to a person who cannot see but wants to know about everything in the picture.

There are many levels of image description and each person can bring their own interests and experiences to the process of describing. A geologist for example may see rocks and soil whereas an ecologist sees trees and a historian sees buildings and clothing styles, all very different facets of the landscape. The trick to good image descriptions is to maximize objective reporting and minimize inference or subjective opinions. Most image descriptions are one to two paragraphs long.

When describing an image it may be helpful to ask yourself questions about the following:



- Land Use (What has and is happening to the land? Look for such activities as farming, excavation, construction)
- Geology (What does the surface of the landscape look like? Are there obvious surface processes such as landslides or erosion? Is the stream channel braided or meandering? Where is the river cutting? Do you see rocks including outcrops or boulders?)
- Biology (What plants are in the photo? What sort of wildlife can be seen?)
- Ecology (What sort of patterns can be seen in living and non-living things seen in the photos? A good example would be the vegetation along the banks of streams and rivers, what is termed the riparian zone. Is it grass, shrubs, trees?)
- Built Environment (What sort of technology is evident? What do buildings look like? How about the roads? Are they dirt or pavement?)

When describing an image it is important to describe the subject that initially draws your eye however it is equally important to mention the other parts of the image as well. Descriptions should include everything that is visible in the image even including things like grass, rocks, roads, rivers etc. Sometimes it is useful to go through the image from front to back and describe everything in the foreground and then everything in the background. It is also important to remember in describing images it is best to write only what is actually visible, a small amount of interpretation is fine however it should be kept to a minimum unless you are very knowledgeable in the subject or fairly certain of the assumption (be sure to include reasoning for the assumption).


How to begin? Start by determining the major theme of the image? What objects does it contain? Can you figure out what season it is? Are there people in the image? What are those people doing? The trick to good and accurate image description is thorough observation with minimum interpretation.

### **Describing a photograph with original metadata:**

Sometimes an image will have metadata, such as writing on the back of the image and recorded during the acquisition process (discussed in LCP Image Acquisition Procedures). This being the case, sometimes it is helpful to include the information directly in the description by including the text within quotations following a statement about where the

information was located on the original image (i.e. hand written on the back of the image: “XXX”). A good example of this is reproduced below.

LS13443\_000



**Sturtevant house**

Town: [Weybridge](#) County: [Addison](#) State: Vermont


Date: 1910?

**Description:**  
This image shows a wooden frame house. The building has two parts, a long single-story section on the right (the summer kitchen or ell) and a two-story section on the left. There is a brick chimney on each section. A sagging porch is attached to both section of the building. In the yard there are piles of leaves and (wood?) scraps. There is a pile of cut and split firewood near the door. A leafless tree stands near the house and leafed out tree stands behind the house. Written on the back of the image "Grandfather's (Watson C. Sturtevant and Grandmother's (Arabella Julia) house in Weybridge about 1910". All image rights reserved to Henry Sheldon Museum, [www.henrysheldonmuseum.org](http://www.henrysheldonmuseum.org).

## Describing a photograph with no information:

Unfortunately, many images have no associated information; if this is the case write a description based solely on what is visible within the frame. Avoid assumptions or inferences unless it is very obvious and directly related to what is in fact visible in the image. See the example below.

LS07678\_000



**Abandoned Farm on Hill**

Town: [Westmore](#) County: [Orleans](#) State: Vermont

Date: 1911-09-03

**Description:**  
This image shows abandoned farm buildings surrounded by open fields. The two distinct peaks in the background of the photograph are most likely surrounding Lake Willoughby. The field in the foreground has several boulders spread around the area with two deciduous trees, one very large sugar maple and one small fruit tree. The barn and house in the next field look as though they have been abandoned for a while with no windows or doors left. Parts of the outer walls are beginning to cave in. There is a field behind the buildings with a few small trees that look like they could be fruit trees. There is a narrow dirt road that is being taken over by grass that is in front of the buildings. The trees in the background surrounding the fields appear to be mostly deciduous with a few conifers mixed in.



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### Things to keep in mind:

- Capital – refers to a city or town i.e. Montpelier
- Capitol – refers to the building that houses a legislative assembly
- The State House in Montpelier is two words (not written as statehouse)
- Comment on the extent of riparian vegetation in any picture with a stream, river or lake. Make sure to use the word riparian.
- Mention porch or chimney if any these are visible on a house or building
- Don't enter multiple paragraphs into a single field in a bulk upload sheet, (the program reads a break as the end of a entry) to denote a new paragraph use "/"
- If there are signs visible in your image, please transcribe them word for word in the description. This most often happened in city streetscapes. Transcribing the signs allows people to find businesses which searching.
- The summit of Camel's Hump is in Huntington.
- The summit ("The Chin") of Mount Mansfield is in Underhill. However "The Forehead" and "The Nose" are in Stowe.
- Do not use slang terminology and try to avoid overly conversational terms (i.e. use of "Checking out" when talking about someone surveying the damage etc).

### Summary:

In the end, a careful balance needs to be reached between capturing all the essential parts of an image in your description and spending so much time that the description becomes tedious and takes too long both to read and to write. Some simple images of landscapes can be described in just a few minutes with two or three sentences. Other, complex images of cityscapes can take 10 minutes or more. On average images take about 5 minutes to describe.



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Example: Describing the following image



LS00534

Now let's try describing an image. Above is an image from Vershire, Vermont in 1897. We obtained the image from the Vermont Historical Society and it had no other associated information.

The most important element here are the ox teams and carts. The description begins:

*“This image shows a horse team, and two ox teams. The horse team is hitched to a four-wheel cart. One ox team is hitched to a two-wheel cart and the other is unhitched. The carts appear empty. The teams are on a poorly defined dirt road. In the foreground is grass cut short with a few stones interspersed.”*

Continue with related information.

*“A man is sitting in one of the carts and another man is standing next to the unhitched team carrying a short stick or whip. There is a woman in the background with a girl near a bridge.”*



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Mentioning the bridge, leads to the stream.

*“The wooden bridge crosses a stream that is dammed near the left side of the image. The dam is made of logs and to the left of the dam is a connected building. It is likely as sawmill because cut lumber is stacked all around the building and there is another pile of lumber just over the bridge by the road.”*

Now, cross the road in the description and move up the hill into the background.

*“The road heads up a gentle hill to a farmhouse near the right side of the image. Lumber is stacked along the fence that borders the road. Behind the house is a barn and several outbuildings. They sit in open fields with what appear to be some fruit trees (apple?) just behind the house. There are some lone trees in the upper fields. The fields stretch up an increasingly steep hill to the ridge-top, which is forested. There are walls or fences dividing the fields.”*

Finally, try and figure out the season using whatever clues available.

*“It is either fall or spring as the trees have no leaves but the stream is flowing and there is no snow.”*