Exploring the National Register of Historic Places

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Introduction

Since 1966, the National Park Service has maintained the National Register of Historic Places, which it deems "the official list of the Nation's historic places worthy of preservation." What kinds of properties are most represented on the National Register? What do they tell us about our country's history?

Methodology

This project explores all 96,000+ listings on the National Register as of June 17, 2021 using quantitative data analysis methods.
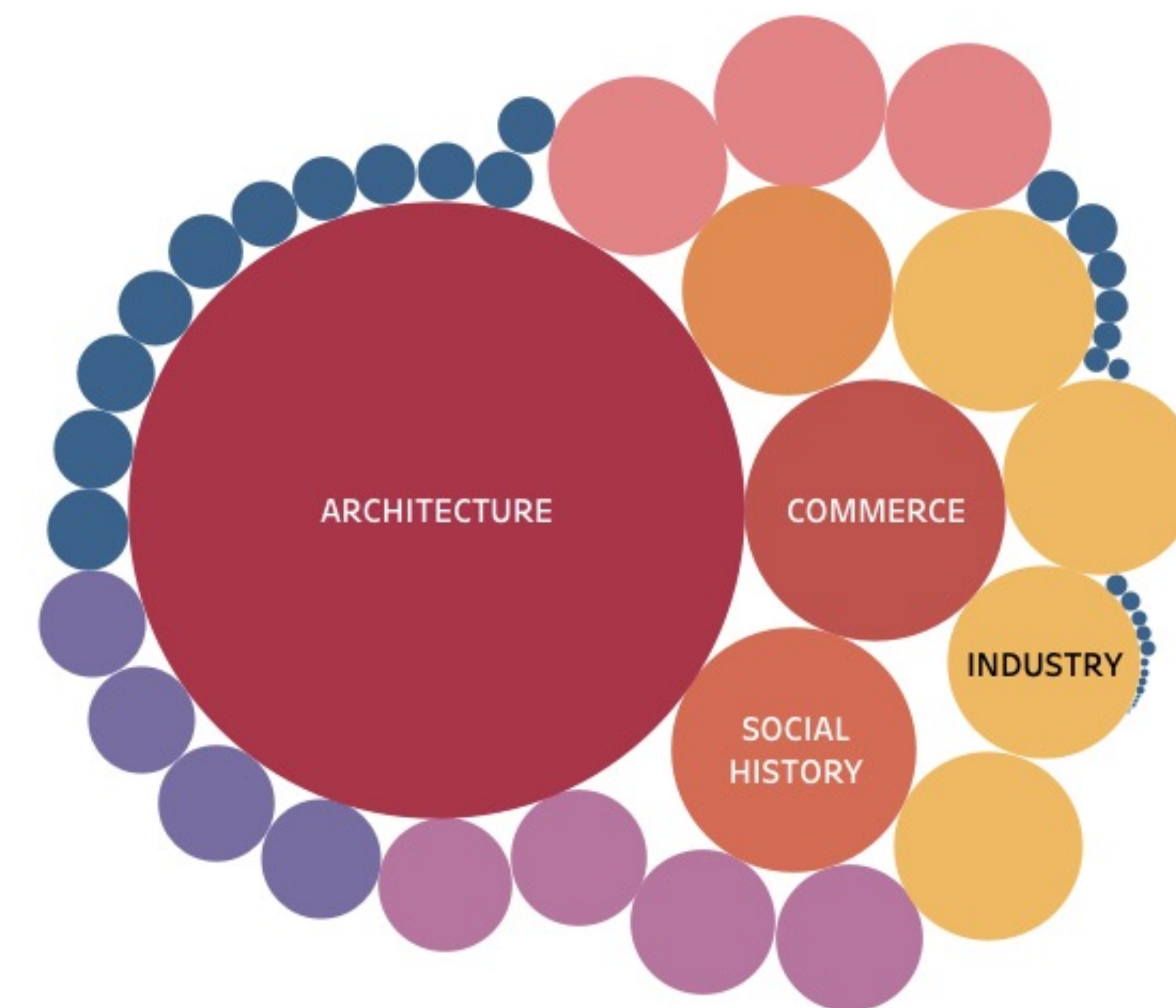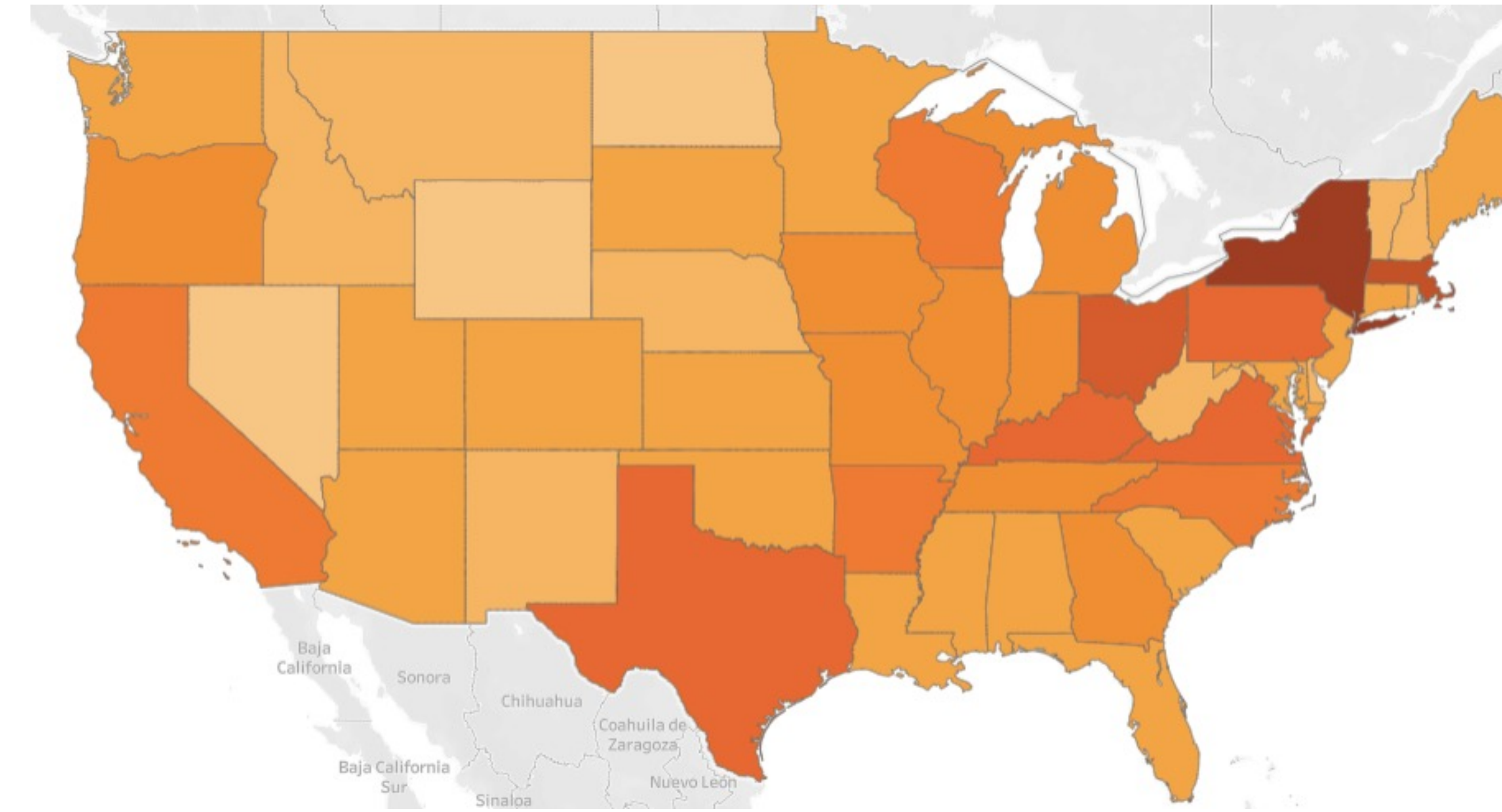
A Python script was used to produce counts for:

- Properties by state
- Properties by category
- Properties by area of significance
- Properties by year listed

Additionally, text analysis was performed on property names to obtain a word cloud of the most frequently-appearing terms.
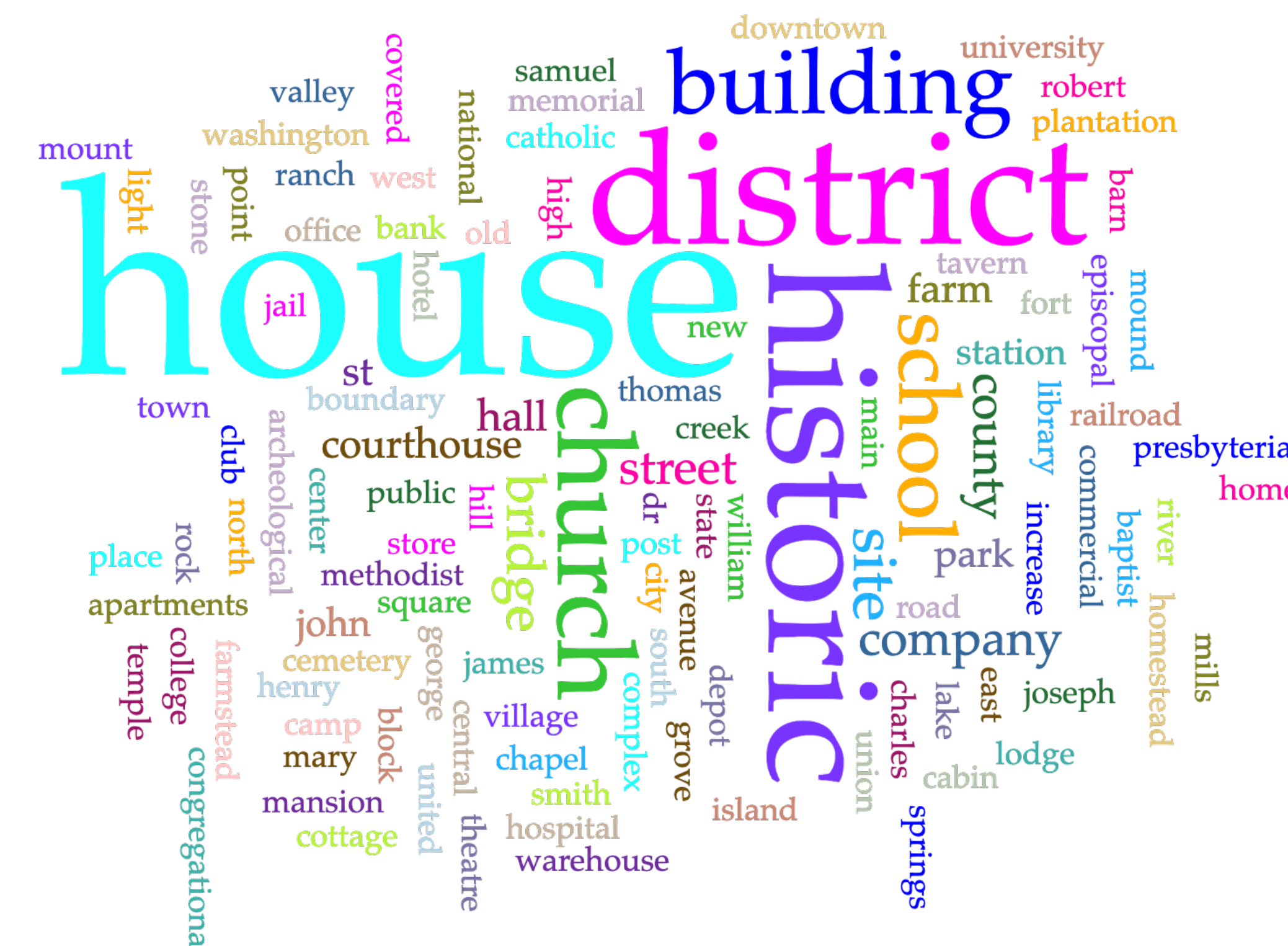
Results

Visualizing the count of properties by state in Tableau Public revealed that the four most represented states were New York (6,726 properties), Massachusetts (4,419), Ohio (4,122), and Pennsylvania (3.512). These contiguous states make up 18.97% of the National Register's listings. In the map on the right, states with darker colors have more listings.

The packed bubble chart on the left illustrates the count of properties by area of significance. Architecture is by far the most represented category; it applies to 71,758 properties, 74.25% of the National Register. Commerce (12,892 listings) and Industry (7,034) are also highly represented. Relatively few listings are marked as significant for their association with people of color; only 5,100 properties (5.28%) are linked to Black, Asian, and Indigenous communities.

The word cloud on the right—created with Voyant Tools—provides more descriptive information about the National Register's listings. The graphic shows many terms associated with Christianity (e.g. church, chapel, Baptist, Catholic) but only one associated with non-Christian religions (temple). There are also many male first names, but only one female name: Mary.

Conclusions

Analyzing the National Register of Historic Places reveals geographic and thematic trends in the listings. We begin to see how the listings reinforce a narrative about our country that emphasizes commerce, religion, and prominent male figures. My hope is that this study generates new lines of inquiry and analysis about the National Register and its representation of American history.

Further information

To experience my visualizations in full, please visit Tableau Public at https://tinyurl.com/4p47m7kn.

Data source

National Park Service (2021). *National Register of Historic Places Listed properties (listings up to 06/17/2021)* [Data set]. Retrieved from https://tinyurl.com/4p47m7kn.

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