



Best Practices Review

A publication on National Register Bulletin guidance

Looking at the Landscape

Introduction

The National Register of Historic Places includes a variety of landscapes, from botanical gardens to cemeteries to golf courses, and each of these properties is properly classified as a “site.” However, properties classified as “buildings” or “structures” may have a landscape associated with them, such as an urban high-rise with a plaza or a farmhouse with fields and pastures, yet these associative landscapes are not consistently addressed in nominations. While a property’s setting is routinely evaluated in the context of assessing a property’s integrity and while there may be some mention of the *landscaping* (e.g., the plants), the *landscape* (i.e., the intentional arrangement of softscape, hardscape, and open space) has not been consistently documented and critically evaluated in nominations as to whether a property’s landscape is (or is not) a contributing resource.

Nominations Discussed in this Issue

Boston Road Plaza (NY)
NR Ref. 100010703

Clemmons Farm (VT)
NR Ref. No. 100012087

Dorris Ranch (OR)
NR Ref. No. 88000724

Ordean Building (MN)
NR Ref. No. 100012387

Schoolhouse No. 5 (NY)
NR Ref. No. 11000326

These nominations are available on the National Register’s [Sample Nominations - Landscapes](#) page.

The National Park Service has issued guidance for addressing landscapes, such as *National Register Bulletin: Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes*, *National Register Bulletin: How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes*, and *Preservation Briefs: Protecting Cultural Landscapes: Planning, Treatment and Management of Historic Landscapes*, as well as topic-specific bulletins on cemeteries and battlefields. However, these documents focus on the identification and evaluation of properties where a building is not the primary resource. By contrast, this issue of the *Best Practices Review* examines landscapes associated with buildings and offers examples for addressing these landscapes as contributing resources in nominations.

Setting or Contributing Resource or Both?

A question for nomination preparers is, when is the landscape the setting for a property and when the landscape properly classified as a contributing (or non-contributing) site?

A property’s setting is “the physical environment of a historic property” and typically includes an inventory and analysis of the property’s landscape: its topography,

vegetation, and any human-made features such as buildings, roads, paths, or fences, as well as an evaluation of the relationships between built features and open space (*National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, p. 45). However, the landscape may be more than just the setting of a building or group of buildings or structures; it may be an important component of a historic property, and properly classified as a contributing “site” (or, as discussed below, “structure”) because

[a] contributing building, site, structure, or object adds to the historic associations, historic architectural qualities, or archeological values for which a property is significant because it was present during the period of significance, relates to the documented significance of the property, and possesses historic integrity or is capable of yielding important information about the period.....

(*National Register Bulletin: How to Complete the National Register Registration Form* (Form Bulletin), p. 16.)

For example, a recent nomination documented a schoolhouse (contributing building) with two outbuildings (both non-contributing buildings) within a fenced parcel that includes programmed and unprogrammed play spaces and a variety of play equipment. These exterior spaces and features were described in the nomination’s Section 7 “Description” as part of the property’s setting but, despite being documented in Section 8 “Statement of Significance” as playing a direct role in the daily lives and routines of the students and teachers, the outdoor space was not evaluated, or recorded, as a contributing resource. This nomination was otherwise well done, and this omission did not warrant a return; however, because the National Register “was designed to be and is administered as a planning tool” (36 C.F.R. § 60.2(a), clearly identifying this outdoor space as a contributing resource in Section 5 “Classification” as a contributing “site” would likely prove helpful should this property be the subject of a Section 106 review (where all too often much time and effort is expended debating resources that have not been clearly identified in a nomination as either contributing or non-contributing).

By contrast, the nomination for **Schoolhouse No. 5** in Hamden, New York (NR Ref. No. 11000326) counts among its contributing resources “a designed landscape, the schoolyard” (Schoolhouse Registration Form, Section 7, p. 1). Schoolhouse No. 5 was listed in the National Register in 2011 for its significance at the local level under Criteria A and C for education and architecture, with a period of significance of 1858 to 1954. The schoolhouse (contributing building) and a wood shed (contributing building) sit within a less-than one-acre schoolyard (contributing site):

A low fieldstone wall (about thirty inches high) defines the schoolyard on three sides; the road side, although originally enclosed by a stone wall, is now open. Within the schoolyard are three surviving trees (two sugar maples and a Norway spruce) that were presumably planted by students to celebrate Arbor Day. All are more than one hundred years old, and one of the sugar maples is approximately 150 years of age.

(Id.)



Schoolhouse No. 5, Hamden, New York, view showing the low stone wall that encloses the schoolyard. (Photograph by Katherine Bridges.)

The boundary justification reinforces the reader’s understanding of the importance of the schoolyard: “The boundary was drawn to include the historic schoolyard, which is defined by the rock wall that outlines the property used for school purposes on the three sides and Dunk Hill road on the fourth side” (Schoolhouse Registration Form, Section 10, p. 1). The Form Bulletin advises nomination proponents to “[c]ount gardens, parks, vacant lots, or open spaces as [contributing] ‘sites’ only if they contribute to the significance of the property” (Form Bulletin, p. 17). At Schoolhouse No. 5, the schoolyard is demonstrated to be and thus is properly counted as a contributing “site.”

Site or Structure or Either?

A plaza may be significantly associated with a building yet the Form Bulletin in its chart of property and resource types does not include “plaza” in either the examples of “sites” or “structures” (Form Bulletin, p. 15). Nevertheless, as illustrated by the examples below, a landscape significantly associated with a building may properly be classified as either a site or a structure, with the amount of hardscape likely determining the choice.

For example, **Boston Road Plaza** in New York City (NR Ref. 100010703) is comprised of a 20-story Brutalist-style tower containing 236 residential units (contributing building), a one-story community center (contributing building), and a parking lot (not classified), within a landscaped site (contributing site). Boston Road Plaza was listed in the National Register in 2024 as a building for its significance at the local level under Criteria A and C for politics/government, social history, and architecture, with a period of significance of 1970 to 1972. (Recall that the Form Bulletin advises at page 14 to “[c]lassify a property having a main resource and a small number of related secondary resources by the main resource. At Boston Road Plaza, the building is the main resource, so the property is classified as a “building.”) The building’s designers, Davis Brody & Associates, leveraged the diagonal orientation of Boston Road to create triangular spaces between the building entrances and the street to create plazas. (Boston Road Plaza Registration Form, p. 4.) Landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg “sought to

activate the site” by designing “a range of outdoor uses including a formal plaza, lawns for active recreation, and a play area, to be used by neighborhood children and those using the community center” (id., p. 21). The fact that the landscape here was designed by a noted landscape architect may have been a factor in its being readily recognized as a contributing site; nevertheless, the involvement of a landscape professional, well known or not, is not a factor in evaluating whether a property’s landscape is a contributing resource.



Top, Boston Road Plaza, New York, New York, view of the residential tower’s base, arcade, and plaza along Boston Road.

Bottom, Boston Road Plaza, New York, New York, landscaped green space and outcrop at the northern end of the property.

(Photographs by Lindsay Peterson & Jesse Kling.)



By contrast, the plaza associated with the **Ordean Building** (NR Ref. No. 100012387) in Duluth, Minnesota, was classified as a contributing “structure.” The Ordean Building was listed in the National Register in 2025 for its local significance under Criterion A for social history for its association with the Ordean Foundation, an organization locally renowned for its support of and collaboration with nonprofit entities, with a period of significance of 1974 to 1986. Although the plaza was constructed independently of the building in 1971, the “design of the Ordean Building responded to the plaza through the construction of [a] patio on the west side of the building, and therefore the plaza [is] included within the boundary of the historic property” (Ordean Registration Form, Section 7, p. 2). Unlike Boston Road Plaza, the landscape here is primarily hardscape.



Top, Ordean Building, Duluth, Minnesota.

Bottom, Ordean Building, Duluth, Minnesota, patio and plaza.

(Photograph by Elizabeth Gales/Phyllis Brower.)

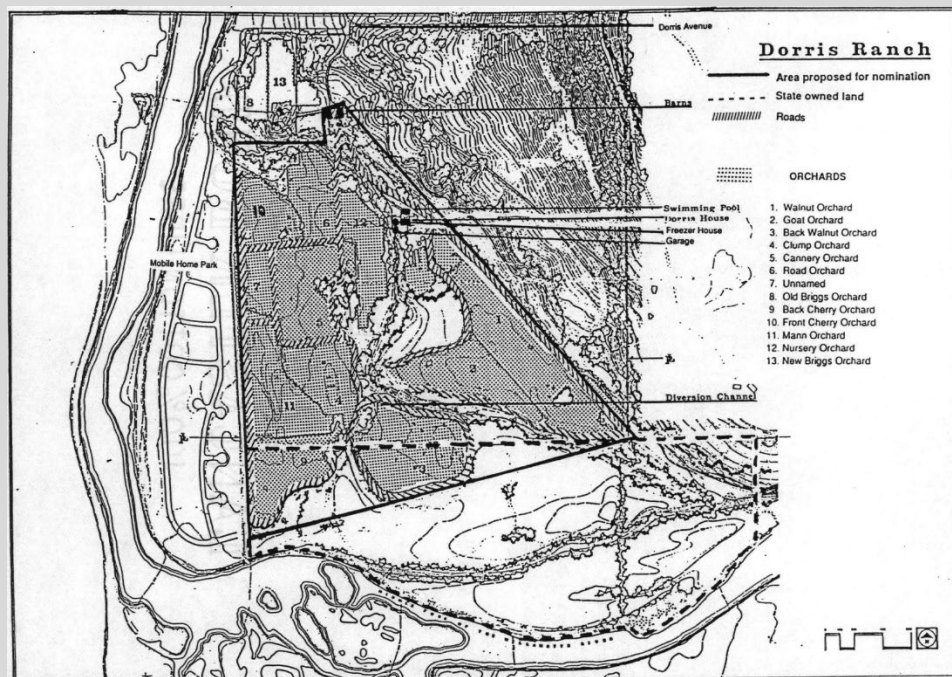


Counting landscape resources and establishing boundaries

Rural properties may readily be recognized as meaningful arrangements of built resources within a significant landscape. For example, a historic farmstead is typically made up of related buildings and structures, such as a farmhouse, barns, and other outbuildings, and the working landscape that connects and contextualizes these buildings and structures should be described and evaluated as part of the property's significance. Unlike the two urban examples above, rural properties may be composed of several distinctly different landscapes, such as fields and forests of sprawling acreage, making counting resources and establishing a boundary challenging.

Whether a property's landscape will count as a single contributing site or multiple contributing sites depends upon the nature of the property. *National Register Bulletin: Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes* (Rural Historic Landscape's Bulletin) does not provide explicit guidance on counting landscape resources; however, the example provided in the Bulletin of the **Dorris Ranch** (NR Ref. No. 88000724) is illustrative. This 200-acre property in Springfield, Oregon, was listed in the National Register in 1988 as a district significant at the statewide level under Criterion A for agriculture, with a period of significance of 1892 to 1936. In addition to a number of contributing buildings, the district includes nine contributing sites, eight of which are orchards. As described in the nomination, the "heart of Dorris Ranch lies in its filbert orchards" (Dorris Registration Form, Section 7, p. 4). Eight orchards have been counted as individual contributing sites: as well documented in the nomination, each was established in a different year and was designated, and consistently referred to by the Dorris family, with a unique name, from the half-acre "Walnut Orchard" established in 1903 with 50 trees to the four-acre "Front Cherry Orchard" established in the late 1930s and eventually planted with 750 trees (Dorris Registration Form, Section 7, pp. 6-7).

By contrast, the **Clemmons Farm** nomination groups several similar areas into two distinct contributing sites. Clemmons Farm (NR Ref. No. 100012087) in Chittenden County, Vermont, was listed in 2025 under the "Agricultural Resources of Vermont" Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF) as a building locally



Dorris Ranch, Springfield, Oregon, sketch map, identifying the ranch's numerous orchards. Eight of the 13 orchards are contributing resources.

significant under Criteria A and C for its significance in agriculture and architecture, with a period of significance of 1800 to 1942. The farmstead includes two contributing sites (“fields and pasture” and “forest/woodlot”). As documented in the nomination,

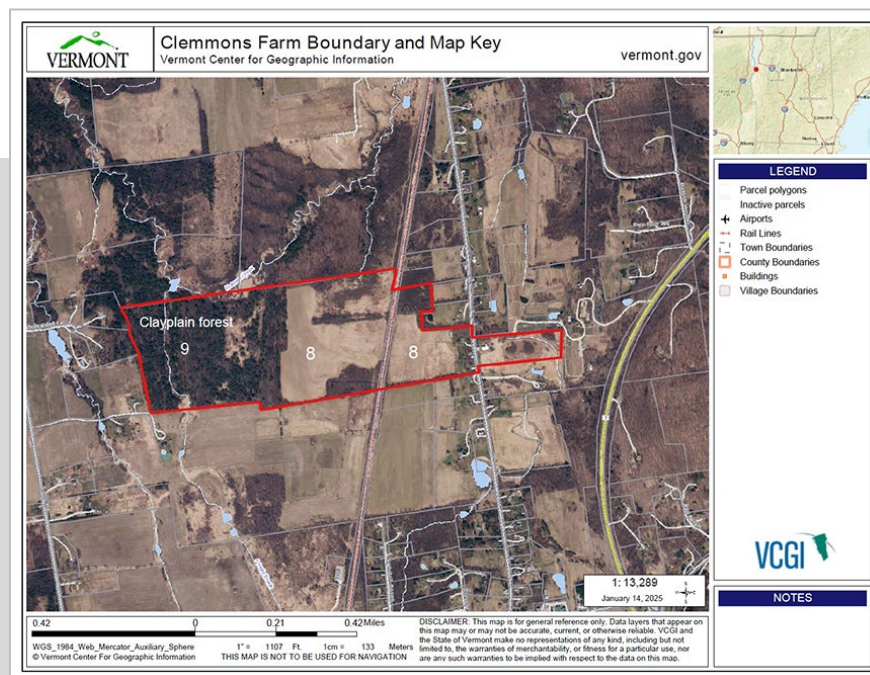
The Clemmons Farm has a little under 100 acres of unforested land divided into three fields: a 10-acre parcel on the east side of Greenbush Road which includes the Main and English barns and two fields on the west side of Greenbush Road, separated by the railroad tracks.

(Clemmons Registration Form, p. 12.)

During the period of significance, the “Clemmons family variously kept cows and calves, sheep, pigs, and horses on pasture and grew hay, wheat, soy, corn, vegetables, squash, melons, and/or alfalfa on these fields” (id.). It is clear from the property sketch map that the fields and pasture area was (and remains) primarily clear of woody vegetation. It is likely that the practice of field/pasture rotation blurred the distinction among the two uses, leading them to be properly grouped together as a single contributing site.

How much of the landscape should be included within the boundaries of a rural property will depend upon the property’s significance and the evaluation of the significance of a farm or ranch should include an assessment of its historically associated fields, pastures, orchards, and woodlots. As with all properties, the boundary should be carefully selected “to encompass, but not to exceed, the full extent of the significant resources and land area making up the property” (Form Bulletin, p. 56). As further explained in the Rural Historic Landscapes Bulletin, at page 24, “National Register boundaries must encompass a concentration or continuity of historic landscape characteristics.”

The boundary should include as much as possible of the working landscape that has integrity to the period of significance. For example, Clemmons Farm includes three contributing buildings (the farmhouse and two barns) and two contributing sites (documented in the nomination as “fields and pasture” and



Clemmons Farm, Charlotte, Vermont, sketch map, with the numbers “8” and “9” identifying the contributing resources of “fields and pastures” and “forest/woodlot.”

“forest/woodlot”). As described in the nomination at Section 10 “Geographical Data,” the boundary encompasses the extent of the remaining 138-acre parcel of the historic farmstead

and contains all of the important components of the “farmstead” property type as articulated in the *Agricultural Resources of Vermont MPDF*: farmhouse, barn, outbuildings, and a surrounding parcel of land historically associated with the farm which currently includes pastureland and woodlots.

(Clemmons Registration Form, PDF p. 32.)

Ten acres of the original 148-acre farmstead were sold after 1988 and no longer retain integrity to the period of significance.

This publication complements the guidance provided in National Register Bulletins by providing examples on specific topics. Your feedback is welcome; please contact Sherry Frear, Chief & Deputy Keeper, sherry_frear@nps.gov.

For copies of the nominations referenced in this document, please visit our [Sample Nominations](#) page.

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All images are from National Register nominations unless otherwise noted.

[The National Register of Historic Places](#) is the official list of buildings, structures, objects, sites, and districts significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture.