



Best Practices Review

A quarterly publication on National Register Bulletin guidance

Preparing a Concise Significance Statement

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Introduction

The “Statement of Significance” in Section 8 of the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form is where key information describing a property’s significance—from relevant criteria to areas, levels, and period of significance—is placed into context. In recent years, discussions of significance in nominations have become longer and longer—often 25 pages or more—through the inclusion of information that, while interesting, is not always needed for readers to understand the property’s significance. This issue of the *Best Practices Review* discusses best practices for preparing an adequately documented Statement of Significance.

Start with a Short Summary

The “Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph” that begins Section 8 is frequently the go-to for a reader looking to quickly understand why a property has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places. As stated in *National Register Bulletin: How to Complete the National Register Registration Form (NRB Form)*,

[i]n the summary paragraph, simply and clearly state the reasons why the property meets the National Register criteria...by providing brief facts that explain how the property meets the criteria, how it contributed to the areas of significance listed, and the ways it was important to the history of its locality, state, or the nation during the period of significance. Mention the important themes or historic contexts to which the property relates.

(*NRB Form*, p. 45.)

Key Concept



Be selective about the facts you present. Consider whether they directly support the significance of the property. Avoid narrating the entire history of the property. Focus on the events, activities, or characteristics that make the property significant. For example, identify significant architectural details if a building is significant for its design, or explain the role the property played in local commerce or industry if its significance lies in those areas.

Adapted from *National Register Bulletin: How to Complete the National Register Registration Form (NRB Form)*, p. 45.

This publication compliments 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.

For National Register Bulletins and other guidance, please visit our [Publications](#) page.

All images are from National Register nominations unless otherwise noted.

A good summary is typically one to three paragraphs and should include the following key information:

- ✓ criteria
- ✓ area(s) of significance
- ✓ level(s) of significance
- ✓ period of significance
- ✓ any criteria considerations

It should also include *why* the property is significant for each area of significance and *why* the period of significance was selected.

Expand the Summary in the Narrative

Section 8’s “Narrative Statement of Significance” should be presented in a clear and logical way. It is not necessary to repeat the summary paragraph in the narrative. As stated in *NRB Form*, at page 45,

[u]sing the summary paragraph as an outline, make the case for significance in subsequent paragraphs. Begin by providing a brief chronological history of the property. Then for each area of significance, beginning with the ones of primary importance, discuss the facts and circumstances in the property’s history that led to its importance. Make clear the connection between each area of significance, its corresponding criterion, and period of significance.

The narrative should not rely on presumed knowledge or scholarly terminology to convey a property’s significance. It should be written for a generally educated audience, but the nomination’s author should not assume the reader will be as knowledgeable on a particular subject or property. The author likely has a firm understanding of why a property is significant and thus believes the case for eligibility is self-evident, but a National Register nomination must be “adequately documented and technically and professionally correct and sufficient.” (36 C.F.R. § 60.3(i).)

The structure of the narrative depends upon the nature of the property, but beginning with a *brief* history of the community helps place the property in context for the reader. For example, if the property’s period of significance begins in 1950, it is not necessary to write at length about the early settlement period of the community; a short paragraph or two on the community’s history likely will suffice. It is easy for a property’s significance to get lost in an extensive history, especially if there are multiple areas of significance or multiple topics under a single area of significance. Each area of significance should be independently supported. For example, under Criterion C for “Architecture,” significance related to style and to work-of-a-master are two separate areas that each require their own discussions. Using subheadings is a helpful way to organize the narrative.

If a nomination is part of a Multiple Property Submission, the Summary Statement of Significance should identify the name of the Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF)—the cover document—and identify the associated historic contexts and property types from it that relate to the nominated property. The Narrative Statement of Significance should not repeat the historic context from the MPDF but simply referring the reader to the cover document, *e.g.*, “*See ‘Historic Commercial Buildings of Long County’ Multiple Property Documentation Form*” is not acceptable. The nomination’s narrative should summarize the relevant portions of the context and briefly explain how the property meets the registration requirements.

Be Selective

The National Register Registration Form is a vehicle for presenting the reasons for a property's recognition as a significant place in American history and culture; however, it is not intended to serve as an exhaustive account of a property, theme, or community. Further, unless a property is significant under Criterion B: Persons, there typically is not a need to include extensive biographical information about community members or owners.

NRB Form, at page 46, advises nomination authors to include

only information pertinent to the property and its eligibility. Additional documentation should be maintained by the SHPO, Certified Local Government, Federal agency, or another institution.

Because National Register nominations may be the first effort to document a significant property in a community, it can be tempting to include as much information as possible regardless of its relevance to the property's area(s) of significance. However, this well-intended effort may result in a property's evaluation of significance being lost among extraneous text. Because the National Register was designed to be a planning tool and is administered as such, making property significance readily available is a best practice. While the National Register Program has accepted additional information in the past—either added at the end of Section 8 or attached as an appendix to the nomination—this is *not* a best practice and is discouraged.

NRB Form, at page 45, encourages nomination authors to

[b]e selective about the facts you present. Consider whether they directly support the significance of the property. Avoid narrating the entire history of the property. Focus on the events, activities, or characteristics that make the property significant.

Narrative length does not necessarily lend credence to a subject. Keep in mind some indirect context may be needed to understand the importance of a particular property as related to its location, theme, or a historic pattern, but consider what the reader needs to know to understand why a property is eligible for inclusion in the National Register.

Be Specific

While providing a general history of a property is important, the area(s), level(s), and period of significance should be the focus of a nomination.

- The area of significance should not be confused with historic function: historic function relates to the practical and routine uses of a property, while the area of significance relates to the property's contributions to the broader patterns of American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture. (*NRB Form*, p. 39.)
- The level of significance may be better understood when comparisons are made to similar properties. While not always required, doing so may be helpful even if not required. (*NRB Criteria*, p. 9; *NRB Form*, p. 51.)
- The period of significance of the property should be documented as the time when the property made the contributions or achieved the character on which significance is based. (*NRB Form*, p. 42.) Focusing on a property's early history or conflating continued use with continued significance are common pitfalls.

Nominations occasionally arrive at the National Register with historical or locational information that would not easily be understood by someone unfamiliar with the topic or location. For example, a nomination may simply reference the “Woods House” when identifying a comparable property. Without a description or image of that property, or at the very least a street address, most readers will not understand this reference.

In developing the Narrative Statement of Significance, nomination authors should consider the reader. As advised in *NRB Form*, at page 45,

[b]e specific in all references to history or geography. Give dates and proper names of owners, architects or builders, other people, and places. Keep in mind the reader who will have little or no knowledge of the property or the area where it is located.

Information included to assist orienting the reader need not be exhaustive. Illustrative figures can be helpful in making a point, demonstrating a concept, or describing a location, especially when the figures are embedded within the text, or included at the end of a nomination, with the figure number referenced in the text, *e.g.*, “See Figure 1.”

Many nominations include a thorough history of a property, yet it is common for a nomination to fail to place this history in relation to the property, or to convey the property’s significance to the local community, state, or nation. Instead, the nomination appears to assume significance based on an accumulation of historic facts about the property. A reader may find these facts interesting but may ultimately end up asking, “Why does this matter?” As provided in *NRB Form*, at page 45, a nomination author should

[i]nclude descriptive and historical information about the area where the property is located to orient the reader to the property’s surroundings and the kind of community or place where it functioned in the past.

For example, if a building is nominated for its physical characteristics, a brief history of its construction would be appropriate whereas a lengthy genealogical discussion of the occupants is not helpful to understanding the building’s significance.

Examples

Inavale Community Hall and Gymnasium

Inavale, Webster County, Nebraska, NR Ref. 100008680

Listed 2023 with a period of significance of 1942–1972 at the local level of significance under Criterion A for recreation and social history

The Inavale Gymnasium is a late period Works Progress Administration (WPA) building completed in 1942, one year before the end of the program. It is a single-story, small scale, concrete block building that was used for community meetings, social events, and basketball games. Later, and through much of the historic period, it was used as a roller skating rink.

This nomination was prepared under the *New Deal-era Resources in Nebraska* Multiple Property Document Form (MPDF). A single paragraph relates a very brief history of Inavale and Webster County; two paragraphs relate the history of the Works Progress Administration in Nebraska; and a single paragraph describes the applicability of the MPDF to Inavale Community Hall and Gymnasium:

For a property to be nominated under the MPD it must be documented to have been funded or constructed by a New Deal-era program and must be a physical remnant of the New Deal-era. Properties

must retain sufficient historic integrity from the New Deal-era period of significance to convey significant association, with primary importance on design, materials, and workmanship. This building represents the property types associated with Education which includes public schools, libraries, gymnasiums, and auditoriums. There were over one hundred education properties constructed under New Deal-era programs between 1934 and 1940. These properties are recognized as eligible under Criterion A for their significance in the area of Education or for their association with Entertainment/Recreation because of their association with leisure activities and for their association with Social History because of how the New Deal offered important employment opportunities for many communities. They may also be eligible under Criterion C for their significance in the area of Architecture if they are good examples of their style or construction type.

(Inavale Nomination, pp. 13–14.)

The Statement of Significance is 7 pages of double-spaced text with embedded images.



Inavale Community Hall and Gymnasium, view of south elevation looking northeast. (Elizabeth Chase) Inset: "Jenny on the Job" poster. (Northwestern University Library Digital Collections)



Agricultural Society Building (Auditorium), view of north elevation looking south. (Elizabeth Chase)

Agricultural Society Building (Auditorium)

Cass County, Nebraska, NR Ref. 100008673

Listed 2023 with a period of significance of 1939–1967 at the local level of significance under Criterion A: Social History, Recreation/Entertainment

The Cass County Agricultural Society Building (Auditorium) is a two-story streamlined Moderne building in the small town of Weeping Water in Cass County, Nebraska. The period of significance begins in 1939 when it was completed and extends through 1967 when the Agricultural Society removed the fair from downtown Weeping Water to land they purchased approximately three miles north of downtown. The nomination's Narrative Statement of Significance is approximately 4-1/2 pages of text, and makes good use of subheadings to walk the reader through relevant history and drill down to the property's history:

- Depression-era Resources
- Cass County Agricultural Society (County Fair)
- Cass County Agricultural Society Building

(Agricultural Society Building, pp. 8–11.)

Bohning Memorial Auditorium

Buffalo County, Nebraska, NR Ref. 100008672

Listed 2023 with a period of significance of 1934–1972 at the local level of significance under Criteria A Criterion A: Social History, Recreation/Entertainment

The Bohning Memorial Auditorium is a one-story red brick building with a basement auditorium. Its construction was funded in large part through a bequest from a local resident, and supported with labor provided through the Civil Works Administration (CWA). Like the Inavale Community Hall and Gymnasium nomination, this nomination was prepared under the *New Deal-era Resources in Nebraska* Multiple Property Document Form.

The nomination's Narrative Statement of Significance is less than four pages: it is comprised of one paragraph on the CWA; one paragraph on CWA efforts in Buffalo County; and two pages on the community's role in the construction and use of the auditorium, including one paragraph on each of the areas of significance. (Bohning Memorial Auditorium Nomination, pp. 5-8.)



Bohning Memorial Auditorium, main elevation, view facing northwest. (Patrick Haynes)

Father Dickson Cemetery

Crestwood, St. Louis County, Missouri, NR Ref. 14001125

Listed 2021 with a period of significance of 1903–1970 at the local level of significance under Criteria A and D for Ethnic History: Black, Criterion Consideration D (cemeteries)

The Father Dickson Cemetery is a 12-acre African American cemetery established during an era in which most cemeteries either segregated African American burials or banned them altogether. The cemetery retains most of its original lot size and the grounds have remained undisturbed. The cemetery is locally significant as a commercial African American cemetery founded during the era of segregation in St. Louis County. It is also significant for its potential to yield information regarding the area’s under-documented local African American population during the Jim Crow era.

This nomination makes good use of subheadings within the 11-page Narrative Statement of Significance, moving from the general to the specific:

- Cemeteries and Segregation in St. Louis County
- African American Communities in South St. Louis County
- History of the Father Dickson Cemetery
- Notable Figures Interred at Father Dickson Cemetery
- Comparison [to other local cemeteries]

(Father Dickson Cemetery Nomination, pp. 8-16.)



Father and Mother Dickson obelisk. (April Scott)

[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.

