



# Best Practices Review

A quarterly publication on National Register Bulletin guidance

## Developing a Complete and Concise Property Description

Contents: Introduction 1 | Start with a Summary Paragraph 1 | Expand the Description 1 | Remember to Review 3 | Examples 4–8

### Introduction

---

Section 7 “Narrative Description” of the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form is the place to describe the physical nature of the property and its associated resources, and to address the seven aspects of integrity. Common shortcomings in this section include a too-short (or too-long) summary; difficult-to-follow descriptions; missing setting and landscape descriptions; and missing integrity assessments. *National Register Bulletin 16A: How to Complete the National Registration Form (Form Bulletin)* asks the nomination author to “[d]escribe the setting, buildings and other major resources, outbuildings, surface and subsurface remains (for properties with archeological significance), and landscape features,” advising that the narrative “should document the evolution of the property, describing major changes since its construction or period of significance” (*Form Bulletin*, p. 28). This issue of the *Best Practices Review* focuses on commonly misunderstood elements of the narrative description by targeting guidance in the *Form Bulletin*, pages 28 to 34, expanding on that guidance, and offering relevant examples.

### Start With a Summary Paragraph

---

Begin with a single paragraph (or two, for more complex properties) that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location and setting, type, style, size, construction date(s) and method(s), any major additions, and significant (character-defining) features. Describe the current condition of the property and state whether the property has historic integrity in terms of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. Remember, a property need not retain *all* aspects of integrity to convey its significance but determining which aspects are most important to a particular property requires knowing why, where, and when the property is significant (*National Register Bulletin 15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, p. 44) (*Criteria Bulletin*). It is helpful to the reader to include in the summary the property’s address, including the county and state; and the number of contributing and non-contributing buildings, structures, objects, and sites associated with the property.

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](mailto: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.

### Expand the Description

---

The narrative should be concise, factual, and well organized. Subheadings may be helpful in moving the reader through the description.

The amount of detail needed in the narrative description will depend upon the size and complexity of the property and the extent to which alterations, additions, or loss have affected the property's integrity. “Guidelines for Describing Properties” in the *Form*

## Nominations Discussed

**Holman’s Barber Shop, South Carolina**  
NR Ref. 100006884

**Hollin Hills Historic District, Virginia**  
NR Ref. 13000807

**West Downtown Austin Historic District, Texas**  
NR Ref. 100010021

These nominations be found on [Sample Nominations](#) page of the National Register website.

*Bulletin* at pages 31 to 34 provides guidance for specific property types, but certainly for all properties, the information should be organized in a logical manner. For example, for a single property nomination—most often, a single building—the building could be described from the foundation up and from the exterior to the interior.

Small urban districts may benefit from a street-by-street description of the buildings, streetscape, and open spaces, following a logical progression from one building to the next, or up and down each street in a geographical sequence. Larger districts may be better managed in the narrative first by describing the general character of the district and condition of the resources; then by describing in greater detail important resources, such as an architecturally distinctive bank or central gathering space. Readers are often better able to follow along when the photographs are referenced in the text as the property’s features are described, *e.g.*, “*See Photo 1.*”

As a best practice, no matter a district type or size, an inventory of properties should be included in the narrative. At a minimum, this inventory will identify properties by addresses, and indicate whether a resource is contributing or non-contributing to the significance of the district. Alternatively, contributing and non-contributing resources may be identified on a sketch map.

The following focuses on best practices for common challenges for all property types, whether buildings, structures, objects, sites, or districts. Because all of these issues are equally important—and often not clearly addressed in nominations—they are presented here in alphabetical order.

- **Contributing vs. Non-contributing Resources.** Both contributing and non-contributing resources should be described in the narrative description. A contributing building, site, structure, or object adds to the historic associations, historic architectural qualities, or archeological values for which a property is significant. However, if a resource is evaluated as non-contributing, a brief explanation should be provided. Is it because it is outside the period of significance? Does it lack integrity and, if so, how?

For large historic districts, it is often useful to provide a clear methodology for how decisions regarding contributing and non-contributing status were determined for individual resources.

- **Integrity.** Each type of property depends upon certain aspects of integrity to express its historic significance. Determining which of the aspects is most important to a particular property requires an understanding of the property’s significance and its essential physical features (*Criteria Bulletin*, pp. 44, 48). The narrative discussion should include a candid assessment of the impact of any alterations to integrity of the property and demonstrate that important character-defining features are extant. Consider walking the reader through the seven aspects of integrity—location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association—describing how each aspect applies to the property. Remember though, it is not necessary to qualify integrity—“high,” “sufficient,” etc.—as properties either retain integrity (convey their significance) or they do not (*Criteria Bulletin*, p. 44).

- **Interiors.** The overall plan and arrangement of interior spaces should be described in the narrative for individually nominated properties. If available, floor plans are helpful in assisting the reader to better understand where significant activities took place inside a property significant for a specific event/events or person/persons. In all cases, the interior of a property should be described in a logical way, *e.g.*, starting with the ground floor and moving to upper floors. Again, it is helpful to the reader to reference photographs as features are described.
- **Physical Evolution.** The narrative should describe the physical evolution of the property, describing major changes since its construction or period of significance. It should begin by describing the current appearance of the property, then its original appearance and any changes, noting when the changes occurred and if those changes occurred outside of the period of significance. This is the place to document events in the property’s past that may have impacted its physical nature, such as a tornado or fire that may have damaged or destroyed some part of the property. However, the historical development of the property—for example, important changes in ownership, or significant city or town planning initiatives—should be discussed in Section 8’s “Narrative Statement of Significance.”
- **Property Setting.** Recall that “location” refers to the specific place where a property was built or an event occurred, but “setting” refers to the character of the place in which the property played its historical role (*Criteria Bulletin*, p. 45). A reader’s understanding of the property may be aided by first characterizing the setting, *e.g.*, residential, industrial, commercial, rural, etc., and describing any modern alterations or intrusions such as demolition, development, or infill. The narrative should then describe the general nature of the conditions outside the boundary before describing the conditions inside the boundary. The physical features that constitute the setting of a property may be either natural or manmade, and include topography, vegetation, manmade features such as paths or fences, and relationships between buildings and other features or open space (*Criteria Bulletin*, p. 45). Referring in the text to a sketch map or locational map is helpful, *e.g.*, “See Figure 1, Map.”

## Remember to Review

---

It is certainly a best practice to double-check that the information in the narrative is consistent with the information in other areas of the Registration Form, notably Section 5 (Number of Resources within Property), Section 6 (Function or Use / Historic Functions, Current Functions), and Section 7 (architectural classification and materials). Likewise, it is helpful to readers for the author to identify, in a list within the narrative description or on the sketch map, all of the resources enumerated in Section 5 and to indicate which are contributing and non-contributing.

### A note on terminology

You may have noticed in this and other publications that we have recently started to refer to National Register Bulletins not by numbers but by shortened names. For example, we have started identifying *National Register Bulletin 15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* as “the Criteria Bulletin” and *National Register Bulletin 16A: How to Complete the National Registration Form* as “the Form Bulletin.” In doing so, we are hoping to be more inclusive of professionals and non-professionals alike in the National Register process, and we hope you will join us in this effort.

## Examples

---

### Holman's Barber Shop

Columbia, Richland County, South Carolina, NR Ref. 100006884

Listed in 2021 at the local level of significance with a period of significance of 1945–1975 under Criterion A for Black heritage and social history

Holman's Barber Shop is significant for its historic role as a Black barber shop within the African American community, and for its association with Columbia's segregation history. The Section 7 narrative summary paragraph succinctly describes the property's physical form, location, and integrity. The narrative description starts by reviewing the documentary record to establish the building's date of construction. The exterior is then described, moving around the building north to east to south to west, and referencing the photos for each façade. The interior is described next, with modifications over the decades frankly acknowledged. Finally, the property's integrity is assessed; although the narrative does not walk the reader through the seven aspects of integrity, it successfully compares historic images and local recollections to the current condition of the building to demonstrate its integrity.



Homan's Barber Shop, Columbia, Richland County, South Carolina, 2021. (Caitlin Cutrona)



Hollin Hills Historic District, Alexandria, Fairfax County, Virginia, 2012. (EHT Tracerics, Inc.)

## **Hollin Hills Historic District**

Alexandria, Fairfax County, Virginia, NR Ref. 13000807

Listed in 2013 at the national and state levels of significance with a period of significance of 1946–1971 under Criteria A and C for community planning and development, and architecture

Hollin Hills Historic District is a Modern Movement neighborhood of innovative, moderately priced houses set within a 326-acre wooded landscape. The historic district is composed of the entire neighborhood, capturing the 1946 and 1956 development phases that continued until 1971. There are 476 contributing and 158 non-contributing resources. The summary description is a single, albeit page-long, paragraph. The narrative description begins by describing the landscape. It then moves to a discussion of Hollin Hills’ architect Charles Goodwin’s style to provide a context for the resource descriptions that follow. The homes are first generally characterized, as “one and two stories, typically with a rectangular plan, and, later, with a few T-shaped and one L-shaped plan” well-integrated with the site’s rolling topography. Next, common key features are identified, and finally, the standardized housing “units” are described. The historic events discussed throughout Section 7 have a place in this narrative description because these events directly impacted the design of the community. The resources inventory appended to the narrative includes the resources’ address, description, style, construction date, and contributing/non-contributing status.



West Downtown Austin Historic District, Austin, Travis County, Texas, 2019. (Katie Hill)

## **West Downtown Austin Historic District**

Austin, Travis County, Texas, NR Ref. 100010021

Listed in 2024 at the local level of significance with a period of significance of 1856–1968 under Criteria A and C for community planning and development, and architecture

This nomination describes the 82-acre, 200+ resource West Downtown Austin Historic District in just over 3 pages. The nomination makes good use of subheadings to organize the information:

- Setting
- Range and Distribution of Construction Dates
- Property Uses, Types, and Forms
- Common Construction Materials
- Architectural Styles
- Integrity (with subheadings Overall District Integrity, and then Common Alterations to Design, Materials, and Workmanship)
- Inventory

The nomination illustrates how a large district does not necessarily require long text in Section 7. For example, the overall integrity of this district is summarized in a single paragraph:

Overall, the West Downtown Austin Historic District retains a strong integrity of setting, feeling, and association. The original street grid remains intact, continuing to communicate the original 1839 plan for the City of Austin. There have been no major changes to the street grid or overall layout of blocks since the nineteenth century. The overall scale of the buildings remains under the tree canopy, following

patterns begun early in the period of significance. The setbacks from the street and separation of buildings from one another continue to follow historic patterns also. Historic-age landscape features like sidewalks, walkways, and retaining walls remain largely intact, and significant old-growth trees continue to punctuate the district's landscape. The high percentage of contributing resources in the district helps to communicate the overall integrity as well – with 207 contributing resources (83 percent) and only 41 noncontributing resources (17 percent). Most noncontributing resources were constructed after the end of the period of significance but continue to use a low scale and preserve neighborhood landscape patterns so that they do not overwhelm the district's overall integrity of setting, feeling, or association.

(Nomination, p. 13.)

Likewise, integrity of design, materials, and workmanship are summarized within the context of common alterations, in a single paragraph:

The vast majority of resources within the district also individually retain their integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. Many property owners have valued historic preservation since at least the 1960s, and most alterations and additions have been compatible with the historic character of the district. For example, the old Allan Junior High School at 1212 Rio Grande Street recently replaced non-original windows with more historically accurate new windows (Photo 18). In other cases, when inappropriate alterations have been made, they are minor enough that the building still retains the



West Downtown Austin Historic District, Austin, Travis County, Texas, 2019. (Katie Hill)

West Downtown Austin Historic District, Austin, Travis County, Texas

	Address and ID#	Date (and source)	Type	Style and Architect	Status
	712 W 14 ST 199628	1890 HHM 1984 survey, 1900 & 1935 Sanborns	Residential Single-family house - Irregular plan	Queen Anne	Contributing
	713 W 14 ST 361397	1910 In field estimate, 1935 Sanborn	Residential Single-family house - Modified L-plan	National Folk	Contributing
	509 W 15 ST 199733	1967 Appraisal district	Residential Office - Other	Mid-century Modern	Contributing
	515 W 15 ST 199732	1960 Appraisal district, 1962 Sanborn	Commercial Office - Box	Mid-century Modern	Contributing

Portion of inventory from West Downtown Austin Historic District, Austin, Travis County, Texas, 2019 (Nomination, p. 27).

majority of its character-defining features and continues to contribute to the historic character of the district. For example, the house at 500 W. 13th Street has some upstairs windows replaced with incompatible fixed windows, and a rear addition has been constructed, but it retains the majority of the character-defining features of the Romanesque Revival Style and survives as one of the few examples of the style in the district (Photo 30). Only about eight percent of the resources in the district have been altered so significantly that they no longer contribute to the historic character of the district. Among the noncontributing resources that lack integrity, the most common alterations are porch reconfigurations or enclosures, along with large-scale additions.

(Nomination, pp. 13-14.)

An inventory follows, with a thumbnail image of each property, property address, date of construction (and source of that information), type, style, architect, and contributing/non-contributing status.

[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.

