



# Historic Buildings:

*Issues in Preservation and Protection*



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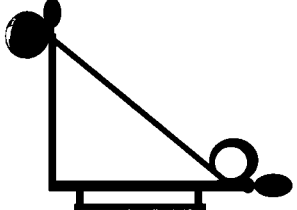
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# Historic Buildings:

## *Issues in Preservation and Protection*



**T**his publication is an introduction to the issues in protection of historic buildings. Historic significance, identifying historic buildings, tracing and documenting the history of a building, and protection of historic structures through political action, certification and property restrictions are discussed. Sources for further information are included.



Historic buildings provide a tangible link to our past. This link allows us to establish a sense of orientation about our place in time. We can learn from the past, and through preservation of historic buildings, can continue to benefit from the accomplishments of our ancestors.

Historic buildings encompass a wide variety of forms, including homes, farmstead

structures, public and commercial buildings. The landscapes that surround a building and the contents of a building, such as furnishings or equipment, may be considered part of the historic resource.

Historic buildings are an important element in the flow of our culture through time: a child visits a historic government building to learn more about what it means to be an American; a city resident on a historic farm learns about pride and commitment in working the land. Historic buildings are studied to tell us about use of materials and creative solutions in everyday living.

Historic buildings are important for our future. These resources need protection. We cannot afford to lose the physical materials, ideas, skills and knowledge of our past.

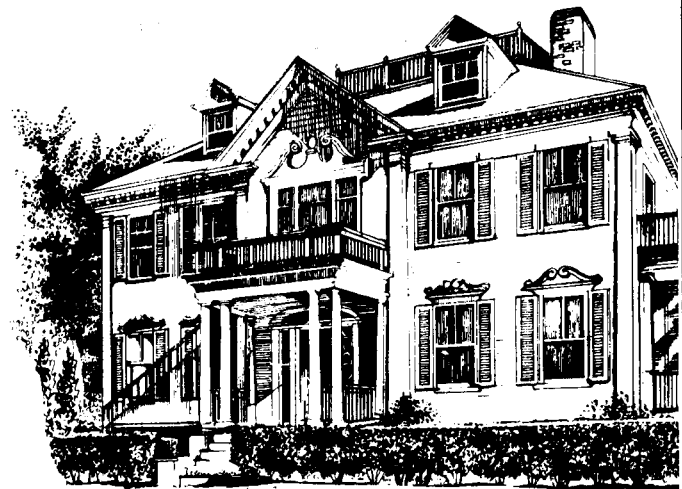
### *What is Historic?*

Age is a criteria for a historic resource, but

it must be defined in relative terms. The definition of "old" will vary with a person's perspective in time and the resource being considered. A drive-in restaurant that is 25 years old might be considered historic, while a courthouse might not be considered historic until it is 50 or 75 years old.

Generally to be considered a historic resource, a building must also be *significant*. One or more of the following criteria are typically used to determine significance:

- *Age* — A resource can become significant simply by the sheer weight of time. An example is



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archeological ruins, such as a building foundation.

- *Rarity* — Sometimes a building is one of a very few that remain today, and is thus significant for what it represents. Examples include: buildings of materials, such as sod, that were not easily preserved; everyday buildings, such as a school house, that were heavily used until left in disrepair or destroyed; buildings, such as commercial storefronts, that were frequently remodeled or changed to respond to new technology; or buildings, such as one constructed in a regional architectural style, that were originally built only in limited quantity.
- Unique or unusual example — Some historic buildings are unusual, creative or unique. They may represent innovative

solutions. Examples include: an unusual form, such as a round barn; a unique material or use of material, such as a home with prefabricated metal walls; or a “one of a kind” building.

- *Outstanding example* — A historic building can be significant because it is a particularly good example of its type. This designation may come from the design, the quality of workmanship or materials, or the current condition or level of preservation. Examples include a house that is a well-designed example of a period style, or a community building representative of an ethnic tradition.
- Connected to a well-known person — Some buildings are significant by association if their owners, designers, builders or users also have a place in history. The farm

that belonged to a government leader, the home designed by a well-known architect, or the church attended by a prominent person, all gain greater historic merit with the link to a “famous” person.

- *Associated with a historic event* — The places of history become significant. These can be the places of major events of wide impact, such as the site of the negotiation of an Indian peace treaty or the opening of the first public school in a territory. Or they can be events of local concern, such as the community center used by the first settlers in an area.

Any building that is relatively old should be looked at for historic significance before it is modified, destroyed or changed in any way. Determining historic significance can be a complex, value-laden process. Objective crite-

ria are used, but the building must also be considered in its physical, social and cultural context. Expert assistance from a knowledgeable preservationist, architect, designer or contractor is recommended.

### *Documenting Historic Buildings*

When historic buildings are known and documented, planning for appropriate protection and preservation can begin. An effort must be made to systematically locate and identify potential historic resources, whether a total community, a neighborhood, an individual farmstead, or a single building.

The first step in documenting historic buildings is to take an *inventory*. The inventory is a record of potential historic buildings within a definable area, such as a farmstead, neighborhood, village or county. An inventory is usually conducted by someone



knowledgeable about historic buildings and the history of the area being surveyed. Contact your State Historic Preservation Office to find out if an inventory has already been conducted in your area.

The inventory may begin with available documents, such as a Sanborn insurance map, plat of a neighborhood, topographical or soils map, or architectural blueprints of a building. The historical inventory is usually recorded on a map or plan. Specific information on *style, design, age, condition or state of repair, improvements or changes, and current uses* of buildings may be included.

A final factor in taking a historic inventory is to consider the *context* of the buildings. What features or elements are important to include to protect the integrity of the historic building? If something were lost, would it reduce the historic significance or value? For example, a house might need to be considered in

total with its lot and landscaping, or with adjacent buildings that comprise the streetscape. Or a farmstead might need to include the patterns of fields that surround it.

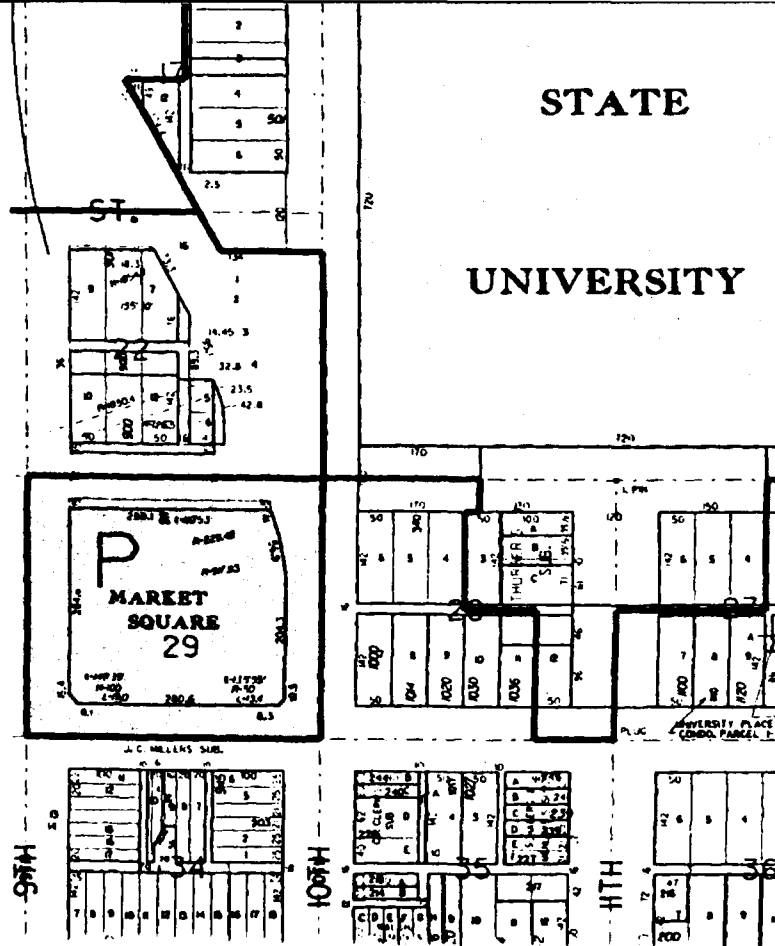
### Tracing History

After potential historic buildings in an area have been identified in an inventory, the next step is tracing and documenting the history. A history provides evidence of the significance of the buildings and leads to greater appreciation of their value. The history of a building includes

the record of ownership; a description of the original style, design, condition or situation; a record of modifications, changes or improvements; details on the people and events associated with it; and general information about the original development or construction. A documented history is necessary to carry out the techniques of protection and preservation discussed later in this publication.

To be successful in tracing a history, you must be knowledgeable about the type of build-

ings you are studying. For example, you need to know terminology about property ownership and transfer, and architectural styles. Or if you are working on a history of a farm, you need to know something about farm operations and agricultural practices. A professional historic preservation consultant can be of assistance in documenting a building's history, particularly if documents are needed for a certification or recognition program, as discussed later in this publication. Agencies and organizations can also provide assistance,



such as those listed at the end of this publication.

To trace the history of ownership of property, begin with the correct legal description. This can be obtained from the deed or the tax assessor's office. An *abstract* of the property, which is a summary of the ownership history, is an excellent place to begin the search for further information.

The county or city courthouse is likely to contain documents of assistance to the historic searcher, such as deed records, building permits, plat maps, land surveys, wills and tax receipts. These records can be helpful in documenting ownership and property transfers, and in adding information about use and modification.

Local libraries, museums and historical societies can be valuable sources of information. Among the documents that can be of help are city directories, insur-

ance maps, newspaper files, street maps, community histories, historic periodicals and magazines, biographies, and archives of original documents, such as letters, diaries, and photographs.

There are private sources of information, such as family bibles, letters, diaries, photographs, or household inventories. Personal remembrances, or oral histories, can also be of value, particularly in giving leads to additional information or in making the historic facts come alive.

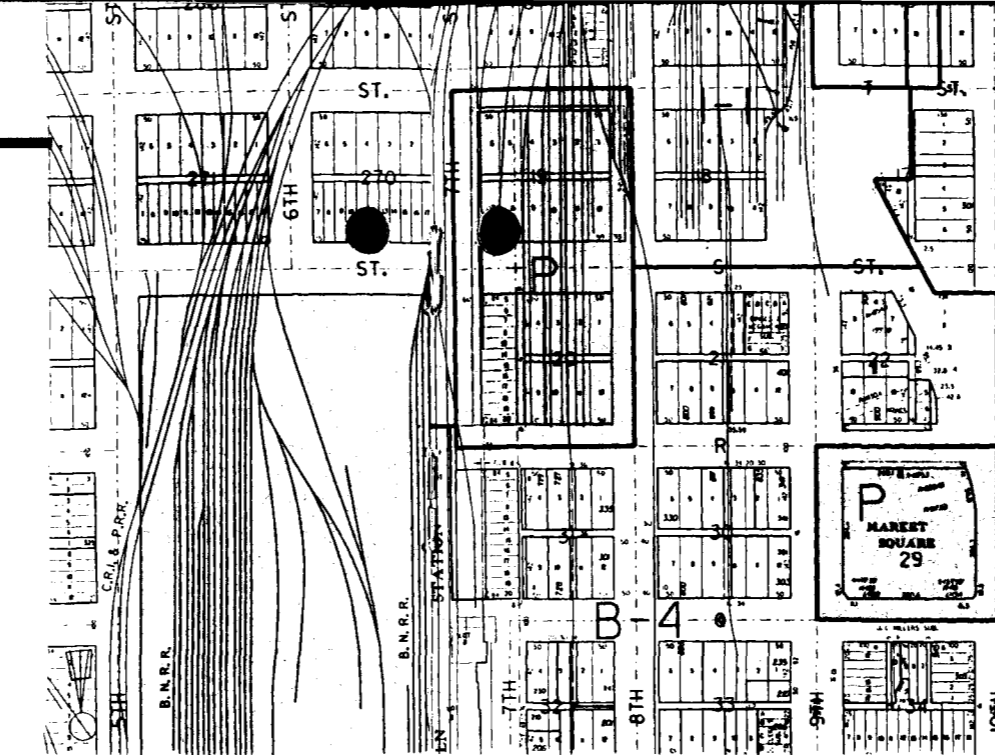
Finally, look for physical evidence at the historic building. Evidence of activity or change of use involving the building can provide further documentation. For example, layers of different color paints, different finishes or patterns of wear that give evidence of walls that were removed, patterns of tree plantings, or creosote stains from fires can all tell stories about how the historic place was used.

### **Protecting Historic Resources**

Available historic buildings today need protection if they are to survive in the future. Physical protection is needed to preserve and maintain the structure. Physical protection can involve *preservation* of a building "as is", *restoration* to the form and detail of an earlier period, or *rehabilitation* to allow a contemporary use while preserving significant features. The appropriate techniques of physical protection of a historic building depend on many factors, including its current state of repair, historic significance, location, potential use, and the availability of resources, such as money, materials and skilled labor.

### **Social Protection**

Social protection is also needed for historic buildings. Social techniques to protect historic buildings tend to fall into three categories: political action, certification and prop-



erty restrictions. These techniques are employed to protect the historic resource from modification that would threaten the historic significance of a structure or its environment, or from destruction.

### **Political Action.**

The first step in political action is to document historic buildings and to make their value known. This includes educating the public, property owners and decision makers. Many public and private organizations, such as those listed in this publication, are involved in education and political action to protect historic buildings.

Political action also involves influencing

legislation for legal controls to protect historic buildings. Commonly used techniques include the community comprehensive plan, zoning and local historic preservation ordinances.

A *comprehensive plan* is a "blueprint" for the growth and development of a community, such as a town or county. The plan covers issues such as the use of land, housing, transportation, economic development and growth, and is the foundation for the decisions about the future of the community. The comprehensive plan should recognize historic buildings in the community and include plans for their protection.

*Zoning* is essentially the regulations that carry out the community's comprehensive plan. Zoning divides the community into a number of districts, or zones, and prescribes appropriate uses for the property within the zones. Example of zoning requirements are minimum lot sizes, types and sizes of buildings, land use, and population density.

Zoning can be used to protect historic buildings by controlling land use around the structure and keeping the uses compatible. Examples include minimum lot sizes in agricultural areas to prevent intensive development or a single family residential zone

in an area of historic houses.

While zoning can be a useful tool, it is not foolproof. Variances to zoning regulations are possible. Typically, these variances are given when the use of the land fulfills the "spirit" of the zoning regulations, if not the "letter of the law". Also, as with any local ordinance, zoning laws can be changed by the community.

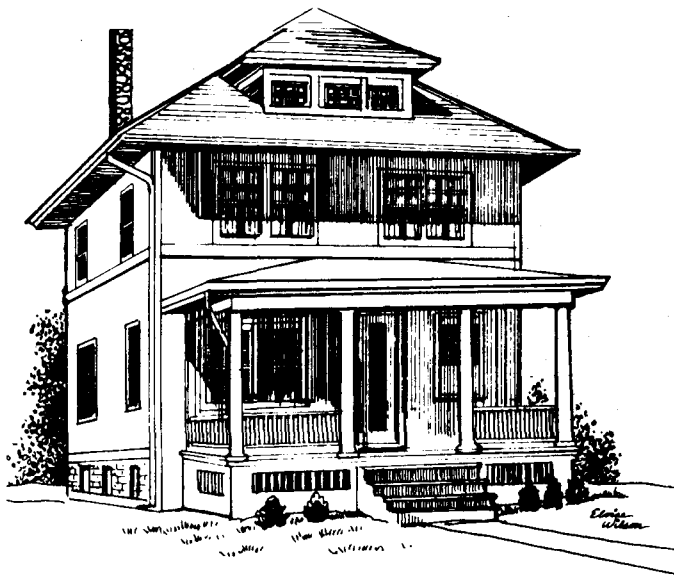
*Local historic preservation ordinances* can be passed to protect specific historic buildings of historic districts from unacceptable modification. An ordinance of this type might specify design guidelines and appropriate materials for rehabilitation of historic buildings. Most historic preservation ordinances require certain types of public review or designated permits before historic resources can be altered or demolished or new buildings can be constructed in a historic district. A historic preservation ordinance usually establishes a

local designation or certification program to register historic resources, as further described below.

Historic preservation ordinances are similar to zoning in that they attempt to control land use to protect the historic value of the resource. A historic preservation ordinance can be a strong tool as it is tied to the specific historic resource, such as a landmark building or a historic district.

*Certification.* An important method in protecting historic buildings is to achieve an official recognition or certification as historic. This is achieved through a local, state or national program. Depending on the program, certification as a historic building may include protections or restrictions on the use and modification of the building and incentives to preserve its historic value.

The *National Register of Historic Places* is the largest and proba-



bly the best known certification program. Many local and state programs are modeled after the National Register. The National Register is maintained by the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior and includes districts, sites, buildings, structures and objects of local, state or national historic significance. Historic resources can be nominated to the National Register by individuals, organizations or government agencies. In addition, historic areas in the National Park System and National Historic Landmarks (historic sites of exceptional historic significance) are included in the National Register.

Listing in the National Register makes an owner of a building eligible for federal tax incentives for rehabilitation. In addition, protection is provided by requiring review by the National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation before certain federally funded or licensed projects affecting the building can take place.

The National Register of Historic Places works through individual State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO). These offices are responsible for preparing and reviewing nominations to the National Register. The SHPO provides initial evaluation of the

historic resource as to eligibility for the National Register, and may provide assistance with the nomination preparation. A listing of the SHPO for each state in the North Central Region is included at the end of this publication.

Nominations to the National Register are screened for historic significance. Nominated resources should possess local, state or national significance in history, architecture, archeology or culture, and possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and feeling.

*Property Restrictions.* An owner of a historic structure also can build protection into the deed of the property. Protection is achieved by restricting the use of the property or by giving another group, such as a historic preservation agency, certain rights to the property. Property restrictions in the deed are legally binding on future owners. Typi-

cally property restrictions are achieved by easements or restrictive covenants.

A piece of property can be thought of as a group of property rights. Property owned in "fee simple" includes all legal rights to the property. The owners are free to do what ever they want with the property within the limit of the law. When an *easement* is created, the owner sells or donates one or more property rights to another person or organization.

A historic preservation easement might limit the type of activities that take place on the property, such as alteration of the building exterior, or obligate the owner to certain activities, such as continued maintenance. The holder of the easement is responsible for enforcement. For example, the holder of the easement might give approval for renovation work, or monitor the property to insure the conditions of the easement are met.



Historic easements are commonly held by non-profit historic preservation organizations or government agencies. An easement can be donated or sold. A donated easement can entitle the property owner to certain tax benefits. An easement affects the value of the property. The value may increase because the historic resource is protected. Or the value of the property may decrease because the use of the property is restricted. In all cases, planning an easement

requires appropriate legal and financial advice, and careful evaluation of the consequences.

*A restrictive covenant* can also be included in a deed to protect a historic building. A covenant is a binding limitation on the use of the property which is accepted by the owner. A covenant is different from an easement in that property rights are not relinquished to someone other than the property owner. As with easements, the ef-

fect of the covenant on property values must be considered.

### *Economics of History*

The cost of protecting a historic building can be high. By their very nature, "old things" can be expensive to repair and maintain. However, historic buildings can often be modified to be economically productive while maintaining their historic value and significance.

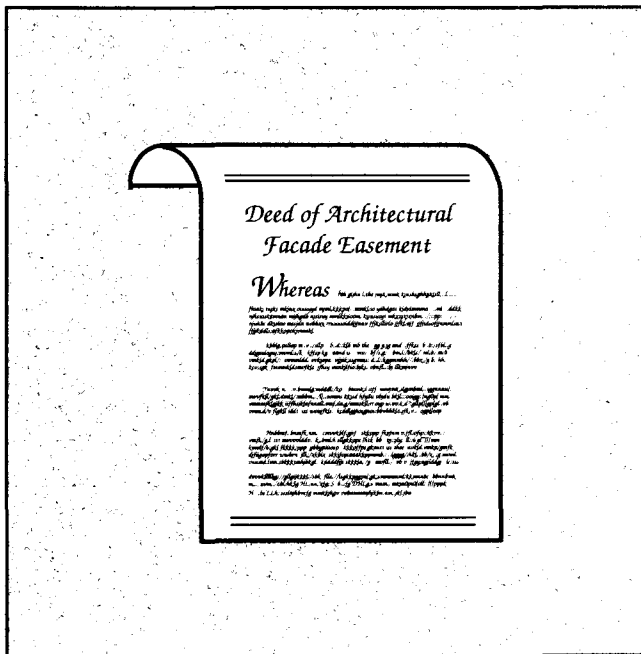
In order to promote protection of historic resources, certain government programs exist to provide economic benefits to those who try to preserve and protect historic buildings. These programs may not make historic preservation a profitable activity, but can make it economically feasible.

*Tax incentives* are available to support rehabilitation of historic structures. A "substantial rehabilitation" of a certified historic structure (such as one listed on the National Register

of Historic Places) qualifies for a federal income tax credit, if certain guidelines are met. For example, the structures must be income-producing, such as a barn or an inn. Older, non-certified structures (50 years or more), can qualify for lesser tax credits. Some states offer income tax credits or property tax freezes for rehabilitation of historic buildings.

Donations of historic easements can qualify for income tax deductions. Contributions of property to non-profit charitable historic preservation organizations may also qualify for income tax benefits.

The decision to preserve and protect historic buildings cannot be made on economics alone. The value of the history, the link to the past, must also be considered. The first step in the process is to become informed, to know what are the historic resources in your area, and what options exist for preservation and protection.





## State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO)

*Illinois:* Department of Conservation, State Office Building, 400 South Spring Street, Springfield, IL 62706.

*Indiana:* Department of Natural Resources, Division of Preservation and Archeology, 608 State Office Building, Indianapolis, IN 46204.

*Iowa:* Iowa State Historical Department, Office of Historic Preservation, East 12th and Grand Avenue, Des Moines, IA 50319.

*Kansas:* Kansas State Historical Society, 120 West 10th, Topeka, KS 66612.

*Michigan:* Michigan History Division, Department of State, 208 North Capitol, Lansing, MI 48918.

*Minnesota:* Minnesota Historical Society, 690 Cedar Street, St. Paul, MN 55101.

*Missouri:* State Department of Natural Resources, P.O. Box 176, Jefferson City, MO 65102.

*Nebraska:* Nebraska State Historical Society, Historic Preservation Office, 1500 R Street, P.O. Box 82554, Lincoln, NE 68501.

*North Dakota:* State Historical Society of North Dakota, Liberty Memorial Building, Bismarck, ND 58501.

*Ohio:* State Historic Preservation Office, Ohio Historical Society, Interstate 71 at 17th Avenue, Columbus, OH 43211.

*South Dakota:* State Historic Preservation Officer, Historical Preservation Center, University of South Dakota, Alumni House, Vermillion, SD 57069.

*Wisconsin:* State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 816 State Street, Madison, WI 63706.

## Historic Preservation Organizations and Agencies

*American Association for State and Local History*, 1400 Eighth Avenue, South Nashville, TN 37203.

*American Farmland Trust*, 1717 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20036.

*The Archeological Conservancy*, 415 Orchard Drive, Santa Fe, NM 87501.

*The Association for Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums*, Room 5035, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 25060.

*Land Trust Exchange*, Box 364, Bar Harbor, ME 04609.

*National Park Service*, Mid-Atlantic Region, 600 Arch Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106 (Indiana, Michigan, Ohio).

*National Park Service*, Rocky Mountain Region, 655 Parfet Street, P.O. Box 25287, Denver, CO 80225 (Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin).

*National Trust for Historic Preservation*, Headquarters, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20036.

*National Trust for Historic Preservation*, Midwest Regional Office, 53 West Jackson Boulevard, Suite 1135, Chicago, IL 60650 (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin).

*National Trust for Historic Preservation*, Mountain/Plains Regional Office, Kittredge Building, 511 16th Street, Suite 700, Denver, CO 80202 (Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota).

*The Nature Conservancy*, Suite 800, 1800 North Kent Street, Arlington, VA 22209.

*The Trust for Public Land*, 82 Second Street, San Francisco, CA 94105; 245 West 31st Street, New York, NY 10001.

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