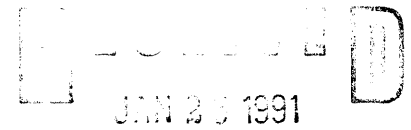


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

## 1. Name of Property

historic name: United States Customs Building

other name/site number:

## 2. Location

street & number: Interstate 15

not for publication: n/a  
vicinity: n/a

city/town: Sweetgrass

state: Montana

code: MT

county: Toole

code: 097

zip code: 59484

## 3. Classification

Ownership of Property: private

Category of Property: building(s)

Number of Resources within Property: 0

Contributing

Noncontributing

  1  

       building(s)

       sites

       structures

       objects

  1  

       Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

Name of related multiple property listing: n/a

4. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination      request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets      does not meet the National Register Criteria.      See continuation sheet.

Maude Shuff  
Signature of certifying official

1-15-91  
Date

Montana SHPO  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property      meets      does not meet the National Register criteria.      See continuation sheet.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

Entered in the  
National Register

entered in the National Register  
     See continuation sheet.

Arlene Dyer 2/28/91

determined eligible for the National Register  
     See continuation sheet.

     determined not eligible for the National Register

     removed from the National Register

     other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

---

## 6. Function or Use

---

Historic: Government/customs house

Current: Commerce/warehouse

---

## 7. Description

---

Architectural Classification: Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals  
Other: Dutch Colonial Revival

Materials: foundation: concrete  
roof: asbestos shingles  
walls: brick

---

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The old U.S. Customs Border Station building in Sweetgrass, Montana, is of a style commonly built by the U.S. Customs Service (a branch of the Treasury Dept.) in the 1930s. This building was used as a Canadian border Port of Entry customs station, in Sweetgrass from 1935-1964. Built in 1935 at the cost of \$100,000, the high-quality, elaborate workmanship and materials put into this building are indicative of lavish New Deal-era spending on public works and government buildings by the Federal government.

The building is a distinctive, solidly made, brick edifice that sets just south of the United States/Canadian border on the east side of what is now Interstate 15. It is built in a Dutch Colonial Revival style, with a gambrel roof and gables that run in a north-south direction, while the building front looks west across the highway. It has two stories and a basement, but was built on a slope that rolls down from the front to the rear of the building, so that both the front and back basement doors open on ground level. It has a concrete foundation with steel framing. The brick masonry pattern is of English Bond coursing with cream mortar and flush joints. The corners on the building and its adjoining garages are solidly joined with brick quoining that projects out 1/2". The roof is covered with asbestos shingles, laid in the square butt ("laid American method") style, in various shades of green. Two false chimneys rise out of both ends of the roof. These have false flues with concrete chimney caps over them to keep out moisture. Copper flashing covers the seams where the chimney joins the roof.

There are ten, wooden gable-roofed dormers on the second floor, five projecting from each side of the roof. These dormers are elaborately done, with pediments on top, and wooden relief pilasters flanking them, all painted white. The window panes themselves are (round-headed) with false (relief) keystones in the frame. These windows are 8-over-8, double-hung, sliding sash, with decorative intersecting Gothic tracery, forming ten separate panes in the rounded window heads. On the gable ends of the second floor, there is one window each, of the same round-headed pane and sliding sash type as the dormer windows. However, these have round-headed lintels of segmented soldier brick with a keystone, and lug concrete sills. These windows are situated off-center towards the front because of the garage wings attached to both gable ends. There are two wooden louvers, symmetrically placed, high up on each gabled end of the building in keeping with the Dutch Colonial style. The only exception to the symmetry of the second story windows, is a small window on the back (east) side between the two northernmost dormers. This is a nine-pane casement window that opens inward into the women's restroom. It has a plain lintel and lug sill, with copper edging around the seams.

The first story windows and front doors have straight, soldier brick, segmented lintels with distinctive white keystones. The windows are double-hung, 12-over-12 units, with lug sills. The paired, wooden front doors are separated by a two-paneled divider, which is wooden, as are the door frames. The upper halves of the doors have 9-pane, fixed window lights. The lower panels originally had brass kick plates, which are now no longer in place. The doors have fixed transom windows above them, with elaborate designs on them. Originally, paired window units were symmetrically placed on either end of the building's main bay, with a third window around each side corner. All were 9-over-9 units.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7

United States Customs Building

Page 1

However, they were removed in 1956, and replaced with 9-over-1, sliding sash windows, paired on the front, single on the sides. The brick quoining on the corners was retained and the alteration was well done. Although the distinctive white keystones are lacking in these windows, they still manage to be visually and architecturally compatible with the building.

The rear entrance is a single door, with a window and panel arrangement like the front doors. On the main level, four of the previously described first floor windows flank the entrance; two symmetrically placed on both sides. However, the back door has a wooden pediment above it, as well as a wood frame. The pediment has a cut reglet with copper flashing on the roof. There is a 5-panel transom window above the door. The rear door sets on the halfway landing of the stairs leading to the basement, so that the top of the pediment is aligned below the windowheads. There are concrete steps with a wooden railing leading to the door. At the basement level in the back, a paired set of doors opens at the west end, having originally six-, and now single-pane window lights, with lower panels. Above the doors, a single, six-light transom is located. There is one window between these doors and the steps of the back door, and two other windows on the other side of the steps. These are all plain, 8-over-8 double-hung sash, with lug sills, and no lintels. They are set in the concrete foundation which is exposed in the back.

There are two, four-car garage wings extending out of either gabled end, running north-south, the rear of the garages being flush with the rear of the main building. They have the same materials, brick coursing, and corner quoining as the main building, but with hipped roofs. The four doorways on each garage have round, segmented brick arches, that are all connected in a continuing series of brick support columns that run across the front in the manner of an arcade. The paneled wooden doors have hinge joints and slide overhead to open. There are four symmetrically placed windows in the back of each garage, with the same characteristics of the windows on the main floor of the building. At the far (north and south) ends of each of the garages, two of these windows are paired, with one central keystone in the lintel. Two square, paneled wood garage doors slide overhead to open at ground level in the concrete foundation in back of the south garage. In 1986, a metal storage unit was attached to the rear (east side) of the north garage wing. The rear windows above the roof of the addition had their glass removed, and were filled in. This addition is not compatible with the rest of the building, but cannot be seen from the front.

The building interior is still in good condition, with 1930s style "state-of-the-art" office designs and furnishings. There are wood floors, trim and bases, with plaster walls. Many of the wooden office doors have an upper pane of opaque glass and transom windows above them. There are six offices on the main floor. A double-case stairway in the rear leads both up and down. The second floor has more offices, restrooms, and two holding cells with wrought iron grills over their respective windows. The basement contains the usual boiler, pump, and fuel rooms, with additional storage spaces.

Originally, there was a two-lane automobile canopy attached directly to the front of the building with supporting columns holding up a wooden entablature which extended out 26½ feet. The roof over this was copper covered, with copper flashing covering the seam where the canopy roof attached to the front wall. There was a short, wrought iron, balustrade-type railing with fancy designs that enclosed the top of the canopy roof, with a flag pole on each outer corner. Out front, three 39-foot concrete islands supported wooden, Tuscan order columns, and ran parallel to the front of the building. These formed two 7½-foot driveways between them. The first island was attached directly to the front of the building, with a half column against the wall, and a full column in front of it, at each of the far ends respectively. The center island had four columns, and the far island had

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7

United States Customs Building

Page 2

---

eight columns, each of the corners on the far island having compound columns grouped in threes. There were collapsible wooden benches around the four inner columns on the two window, outer islands, as well as two benches against the wall of the building on the inner island. The entire canopy structure was removed in 1956, apparently to make room for a widening of the highway which runs in front of the building. This was unfortunate, as it must have been an impressive attachment, judging by the blue prints.

The U.S. Customs Building is an attractive building which stands out locally and regionally for its distinctive architecture. The original design of the building is well-preserved despite the removal of the automobile canopy, and the garage addition at the back. As the most substantial building in Sweetgrass, it is a focal point of the community, conveying accurately the importance of the border crossing to the town's development.

---

## 8. Statement of Significance

---

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Statewide and Locally

Applicable National Register Criteria: A, C

Areas of Significance: Government  
Commerce  
Architecture

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): n/a

Period(s) of Significance: 1935-1940

Significant Person(s): n/a

Significant Dates: 1935

Cultural Affiliation: n/a

Architect/Builder: U.S. Treasury Department  
Procurement Division, Public Works Branch,  
Supervising Architect, Louis A. Simon

---

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The U.S. Customs Building is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A, in a national context for its important associations with trade and law enforcement along Montana's northern border. In a statewide context, it is linked to both commerce and the New Deal programs which salvaged the state economically during the 1930s. And in a local context, it has further functioned as an anchor to community and reflected a federal presence which catalyzed local growth. The building additionally gains significance under Criterion C, as an outstanding example of Dutch Colonial Revival architecture manifested in a public works building of the mid-1930s.

The U.S. Customs Building is located on Montana's northern border with Canada, a region known as the Hi-Line. The Montana Hi-Line is an area over 400 miles wide, running from the east slope of the Rockies just south of the Canadian border, eastward to North Dakota. Just east of Sweetgrass lie the Sweetgrass Hills, beyond which there are few topographical interruptions of the open, flat plains. The region is subject to wide extremes of heat in the summer and cold in the winter. With a sparse population, it has long been a favored area to smuggle contraband across the border, either way. In the latter 19th century, this area was the site of the "Whoop-up Trail," a major route for renegade traders based out of Fort Benton on the Missouri River, who illegally shipped goods north and sold them across the border, including alcohol and guns to the Indians. The Canadian Mounties finally put a stop to this lucrative trade in the 1880s.

Sweetgrass has been a major port of entry and trade in that section of the open Montana Hi-Line for the past hundred years. The town of Sweetgrass was founded in 1890, as a railway point on an early, narrow gauge railway which connected to the Alberta Railroad and Irrigation Co. southern terminus at Coutts, Alberta. Great Northern Railway purchased the line in 1901 and laid a standard track from Great Falls to Sweetgrass. The first railway depot building straddled the international boundary, housing railway agents from both sides of the border. The first customs and immigration officials from both Canada and the U. S. were also stationed here.

Customs and immigration officials were based in the train depot through the 1900s and 1910s, when homesteading brought many settlers to the country surrounding Sweetgrass. During the 1910s and 1920s, prohibition prompted a resurgence of illicit trade along this area of the border. Growth of population and trade along the border, coupled with extensive bootlegging and alcohol smuggling during the prohibition era, apparently influenced the U.S. Customs Service to strengthen its presence along the international boundary during the 1930s. The U.S. Customs Building at Sweetgrass visibly communicates the commitment by the federal government to effectively police its remote borders.

The U.S. Customs Building also reflects the era of the Great Depression, and the Roosevelt administration's "New Deal" which had a tremendous effect on Montana's economic, political and social fabric. All told, the federal government pumped over 381 million federal dollars into Montana in this period, while loaning another 141 million. This made Montana the second highest state in the nation for federal investment per capita (710 dollars per person; 214 in loans). Adjusting these figures to their modern equivalent shows a very impressive investment indeed. Throughout the state, public works programs were initiated, while existing federal programs and agencies, like the Customs Service, were beefed up.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8

United States Customs Building

Page 1

---

Construction of substantial government buildings, including the U.S. Customs Building, in Montana communities was one of the leading forms of public assistance.

The very handsome brick, Dutch Colonial Revival building, built for the border inspection station at Sweetgrass in 1935, stands out quite distinctly on the lonely open plains of the region, and is somewhat anachronistic, as one tends to associate colonial architecture with the eastern seaboard. There were only three other border stations of this style built west of the Great Lakes region. One is in Sumass, Washington, built just like the one in Sweetgrass, but without the garage wings. There is one in Pembina, North Dakota, which has a darker (almost purple) shade of brick, and one is located right across the Red River (which forms the state border) from it, in Noyes, Minnesota.

The design is distinctly Dutch Colonial, reflecting the popular revival of the style during the early 20th century. The building's symmetrical, simple massing; steeply-pitched gambrel roof; end wall chimneys; projecting upper-level dormers with round-headed, multi-light windows; small windows placed in the gambrel ends; and cross bond brick coursing are all characteristic of this colonial style of architecture.

For many people crossing the border, the sight of the station at Sweetgrass has for 55 years been an unmistakable landmark on a trackless prairie, letting people know they have reached their destination. It has marked the prominence of the Sweetgrass community as an important border town in this remote region and commemorates the hundred-year history of federal customs and immigration activities here at Sweetgrass, serving as an ever-present reminder of the long arm of the federal government's influence and authority.

---

## 9. References

---

Original Blueprints, February 20, 1935; June 9, 1935, Treasury Department, Procurement Division; (also photos provided by current owners).  
Barness, Richard (current owner), telephone interview with Nathan Latta, August 10, 1990.  
Echoes From the Prairie, stories compiled by the Prairie Homemakers, et al, Shelby, Montana, Shelby promoter, 1976.  
Shelby Tribune, July 25, 1935, p.1.; September 19, 1935, p.1; September 26, 1935, p.1; September 10, 1936.  
Lerum, Grace, Unpublished manuscript on Shelby history, n.d.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.  
 previously listed in the National Register  
 previously determined eligible by the National Register  
 designated a National Historic Landmark  
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_  
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Location of Additional Data:

State historic preservation office  
 Other state agency  
 Federal agency  
 Local government  
 University  
 Other -- Specify Repository:

---

## 10. Geographical Data

---

Acreage of Property: Less than one acre

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	12	429885	5427480

Verbal Boundary Description:

Beginning at International Boundary Monument No. 334 on the boundary between the Province of Alberta, Canada, and the State of Montana, U.S.A.; then West, 188.70 feet, along said boundary to the westerly right of way line of the Burlington Northern Railroad Company and the TRUE POINT OF BEGINNING; then West, 61.19 feet, along said boundary to the easterly right of way of Interstate Highway 15; then S0°41'31"W, 186.50 feet, along said highway right of way; then N89°31'34"E, 72.50 feet, to the westerly right of way of the Burlington Northern Railroad Company; then 186.18 feet along a course to the right with a radius of 1960.10 feet (chord length=186.11 feet, chord bearing: NO2°47'16"W) to the TRUE POINT OF BEGINNING; containing 0.28 acres.

Boundary Justification:

Legal property boundary as per official blueprints and official, signed certificate of surveyor, Wade Wuith, PE and LS, 3/9/90.

---

## 11. Form Prepared By

---

Name/Title: Nathan Latta	Date: August 1990
Organization: State Historic Preservation Office	Telephone: 406/444-7715
Street & Number: 225 N. Roberts	Zip: 59620
City or Town: Helena	State: Montana