

Greenbelt (67-004)

Located in central Prince George's County, Greenbelt is one of three New Deal-era planned communities in the United States, designed as a "green town" by the federal government. Greenhills, Ohio and Greendale, Wisconsin were chosen as other green towns.¹ Rexford Guy Tugwell, director of the Rural Resettlement Administration, convinced President Franklin Roosevelt to consider the pioneer planning concept of "green towns" as a way to move low- and moderate-income families out of crowded urban areas and into smaller planned communities with more job opportunities, while still providing them with the convenience of a large urban area nearby.²

The farmland of suburban Maryland was determined to be an ideal setting for the first green town. Greenbelt's location, topography, accessibility, and the low cost of land made it an attractive option for a garden community near Washington, D.C. Designers took advantage of the crescent-shaped plateau in the design and construction of the community, using the curves of the landscapes as their guide. Commercial, recreational, public, and educational buildings form the nucleus of Greenbelt. Residential housing interspersed with parks, recreation areas, and religious buildings wrap around the commercial core.³ Between 1935 and 1937, the federal government constructed 574 group houses in 135 buildings, 306 multi-family residences in 12 buildings, five experimental pre-fabricated detached houses, and rehabilitated seven farmhouses.⁴ The group house or rowhouse is the predominant building type in Greenbelt. As part of the initial development of Greenbelt, a private developer constructed ten houses in a subdivision known as "Parkbelt." In 1937, before any residents moved into the new housing, Greenbelt incorporated. Greenbelt was the first city in Maryland to use the council-manager form of government.⁵ By 1941, the government was in need of housing for its defense workers and constructed an additional 1,000 wood-frame dwellings in the northern area of Greenbelt. The defense housing was arranged in "superblocks" that faced towards courts, rather than busy streets. Each house had a service side for parking and deliveries, and a garden side for use as a yard or play area.⁶

Greenbelt's success and popularity was due to several different planning concepts including: moderately-priced housing in a garden or park setting, cluster housing, superblocks with interior green space, an interior sidewalk system that separated pedestrian traffic from vehicular traffic, a central core of commercial, civic, recreational, athletic, and park facilities, and a surrounding belt of open space that created a pastoral setting and was intended to preclude future development.⁷

There is a limited range of building types and styles within the original Greenbelt community. The design reflected the functionality and purpose of the community. Minimally ornamented, most of the buildings reflect the popular styles of Art Deco, Moderne, and International style. Reginald J. Wadsworth and Douglas D. Ellington served as the principal architects of Greenbelt, while Harold Bursley served as the engineering designer.⁸ Most buildings were constructed of concrete block with flat roofs, which were practical, inexpensive to build, inexpensive to maintain, and required little skill to construct, allowing for the employment of lesser skilled workers in the post-Depression era. Other buildings were wood-frame

¹ Thomas Hauenstein, "Greenbelt Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (November 1979), 8:13.

² Hauenstein, "Greenbelt," 8:13.

³ Hauenstein, "Greenbelt," 7:1.

⁴ Elizabeth Jo Lampl, "Greenbelt, Maryland Historic District," National Historic Landmark Nomination (March 1996), 7.

⁵ Hauenstein, "Greenbelt," 7:1.

⁶ Hauenstein, "Greenbelt," 7:2.

⁷ Hauenstein, "Greenbelt," 8:14.

⁸ Hauenstein, "Greenbelt," 8:1

dwellings with brick veneer. The majority of rowhouses are two stories in height and are in groups of two- to eight-units, while the apartment buildings are typically three stories in height. New building materials were also used in the construction, including glass block that provides some of the only decorative elements on buildings in Greenbelt. Unlike its sister cities Greenhills, Ohio, and Greendale, Wisconsin, Greenbelt has retained many of its original features and designs.⁹

The Roosevelt Center serves as the commercial and social core of Greenbelt. Centrally located within the community, the pedestrian mall contains a variety of amenities including restaurants, retail stores, a bank, professional offices, grocery store, fitness center, the Greenbelt Theater, gas station, and a post office. The commercial buildings were designed in the Streamline Moderne style and are two-story concrete-block structures covered in brick veneer. There are a number of public buildings in Greenbelt including the Greenbelt Museum, Greenbelt Municipal Building, Greenbelt Library, Greenbelt Center School (PG: 67-004-01), Greenbelt Elementary School, Greenbelt Middle School, Greenbelt Police Station and Fire Department, and a variety of public parks and recreation fields. Additionally, there are several churches and a synagogue in the community that represent a variety of faiths.

Historic maps depict the rural origins of the area that would become Greenbelt. Both the 1861 Martenet map and the 1878 Hopkins map show scattered farmsteads in the area.¹⁰ The maps illustrate the locations of the Turner and Walker farms. All that remains of these farms are family burial plots. These two cemeteries, along with another burial ground, are designated as Historic Resources and are owned by the city of Greenbelt. Walker Cemetery (PG: 67-004-03a) is the smallest of the three cemeteries. It is believed that two Revolutionary War veterans were buried there: Isaac Walker (1721-1807) and Nathan Walker (1756-1842). The site is located behind an industrial park in a wooded area. The two markers on the site date from the twentieth century, one of which was placed by the Prince George's County Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Turner Cemetery (PG: 67-004-03b), now known as the Greenbelt City Cemetery, is the site of approximately 45 graves that range in date from 1799 to 2007. The land was originally owned by the Turner family, who purchased a 125-acre tract called "Wild Cat." Over time, the Turner family amassed other parcels of land, but always remained on their original farmstead. The Turners occupied their family farm until 1935, when they sold their property to the federal government for the development of Greenbelt. The cemetery was later deeded to the city in 1941 and is used as a public cemetery. At least twelve members of the Turner family are buried in the cemetery and several of their headstones have been mounted and preserved in a display case. A few early residents of Greenbelt were also buried there.¹¹ The Hamilton Cemetery (PG: 67-004-03c) is the burial grounds of the Hamilton family, who settled in the area on land that is now part of Greenbelt. John Hamilton patented 240 acres in the eighteenth century and named the property "Hamilton's Purchase." This land is now much of what is called Greenbelt East.¹² The cemetery is overgrown and surrounding land is being used as garden plots by local resident. Headstones from several of the graves have been mounted in concrete and placed on display.

There is one Historic Site in Greenbelt:

- PG: 67-004-01, Greenbelt Center School, 15 Crescent Road

⁹ Thomas Hauenstein, "Greenbelt Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (November 1979), 8:13.

¹⁰ Simon J. Martenet, "Atlas of Prince George's County, Maryland, 1861, Adapted from Martenet's Map of Prince George's County, Maryland" (Baltimore: Simon J. Martenet C.E., 1861) and G.M. Hopkins, "Atlas of Fifteen Miles Around Washington, Including the County of Prince George Maryland" (Philadelphia: G.M. Hopkins, C.E., 1878).

¹¹ "Turner Cemetery," memo posted on board at Turner Cemetery.

¹² "Hamilton Cemetery," memo posted on board at Hamilton Cemetery.

There are three Historic Resources in Greenbelt:

- PG: 67-004-03a, Walker Cemetery, 7800 block Walker Drive
- PG: 67-004-03b, Turner Cemetery, 6300 block Ivy Lane
- PG: 67-004-03c, Hamilton Cemetery

National Register Historic District

Greenbelt was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as an Historic District in 1980. The historic district covers over 750 acres of land including three discontinuous parcels that are historically connected to Greenbelt, but over time have been separated by the development of roads and highways. Two of the parcels include the Walker and Turner cemeteries, and the third includes Greenbelt Middle School. The main portion of the historic district of Greenbelt is roughly bounded by the City of Greenbelt limits on the north, the Baltimore-Washington Parkway on the east, Greenbelt Road on the south, the Capital Beltway on the southwest, and Kenilworth Avenue (Route 1) on the northwest. The period of significance for Greenbelt was defined as 1935-1941, which covered the initial construction of the community, as well as the defense housing constructed in 1941. The district was recognized for areas of significance in architecture, community planning, and politics/government.

National Historic Landmark

On the occasion of its 60th anniversary, the Greenbelt Historic District was designated as a National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1997. The period of significance was extended from 1935 to 1946 to encompass maintenance buildings constructed by the Public Housing Authority in 1944. The designation includes 756.8 acres of land with 419 contributing resources and 28 non-contributing resources, mostly due to age. Greenbelt was designated under Criteria 1, 3, and 4 for its association with broad patterns of events, an association with a great idea or ideal of the American people, and for embodying distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or a significant, distinctive, and exceptional entity. Greenbelt is representative of the mass migration of Americans from rural to urban areas in the early twentieth century. The community was designed as a response to this migration and as a government-sponsored program to help the working class by providing affordable housing and job opportunities. Greenbelt provided a community whose role was to support families and give them a healthy environment to live and raise their children. Greenbelt is also significant for its characteristics as a planned community with unified architecture that incorporates residential, commercial, recreational, agricultural, and industrial zones. Greenbelt contains significant examples of Art Deco and Streamline Moderne architecture. It was determined that Greenbelt possesses a high degree of integrity of location, setting, design, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association. Greenbelt was recognized under the themes of Architecture/Regional and Urban Planning, Political and Military Affairs/The Great Depression and the New Deal, Social and Humanitarian Movements/Communitarianism and Utopianism, and American Ways of Life/Suburban Life. The three cemeteries associated with Greenbelt were also included under Exception D as burial sites directly related to the history of Greenbelt.¹³

Windshield Survey

A windshield survey of Greenbelt was conducted in July 2007. There are few visible changes in the district since its designation as a National Register historic district in 1980. The buildings have remained remarkably free of alterations and additions, most likely due to the cooperative housing that exists in

¹³ Lampl, "Greenbelt,"8:22-24.

Greenbelt. Minimal alterations consist of cosmetic changes, including adding vinyl siding, window replacements, removal of paint from brick structures, and changing roofing materials. There has been very little infill within Greenbelt. Most of the infill dates from the 1960s and 1970s and consists primarily of community and religious buildings that are complementary in design and style to the original buildings constructed in the 1930s. Some new apartment buildings were also constructed in the second half of the twentieth century. Although they are not stylistically consistent with the original architecture, the apartment buildings are not considered intrusive to the historic district.¹⁴ Roosevelt Center, the commercial center of Greenbelt, was restored in the 1990s. As part of this restoration, the neon sign of the Greenbelt Theatre has been restored, complementing the Streamline Moderne design of the theatre. The NHL nomination notes that only one building, one of the defense houses, has been demolished.¹⁵ The district has remained a very cohesive and intact community. The boundaries of Greenbelt have not been compromised and both the district as a whole and the boundaries retain their integrity.

Local Historic District Evaluation

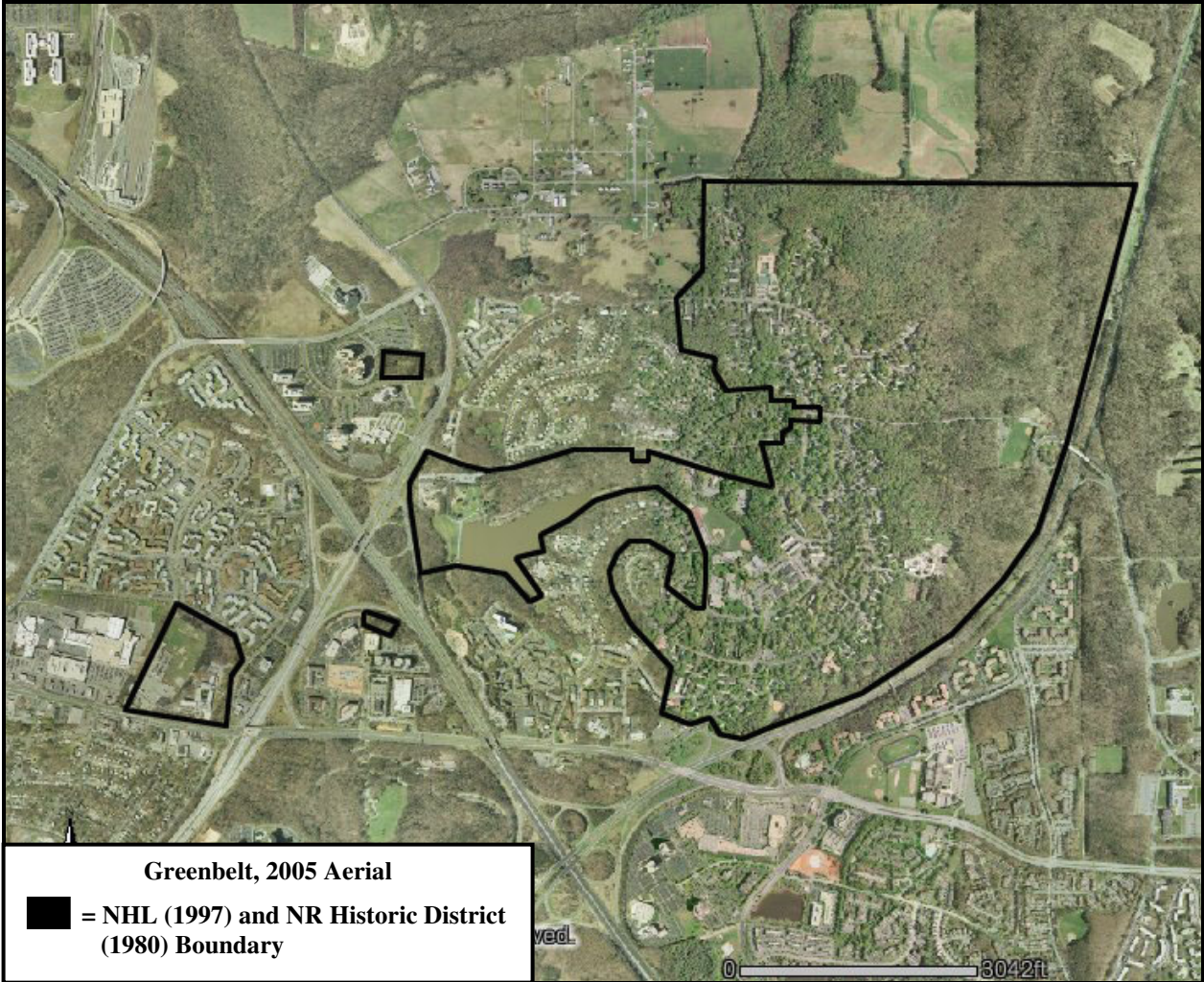
In addition to its designation as a National Register Historic District and National Historic Landmark, Greenbelt merits designation as a local historic district. Greenbelt is representative of several Prince George's County Heritage Themes including social history, suburban growth, and residential architectural styles. Greenbelt meets the following criteria for designation as a local historic district:

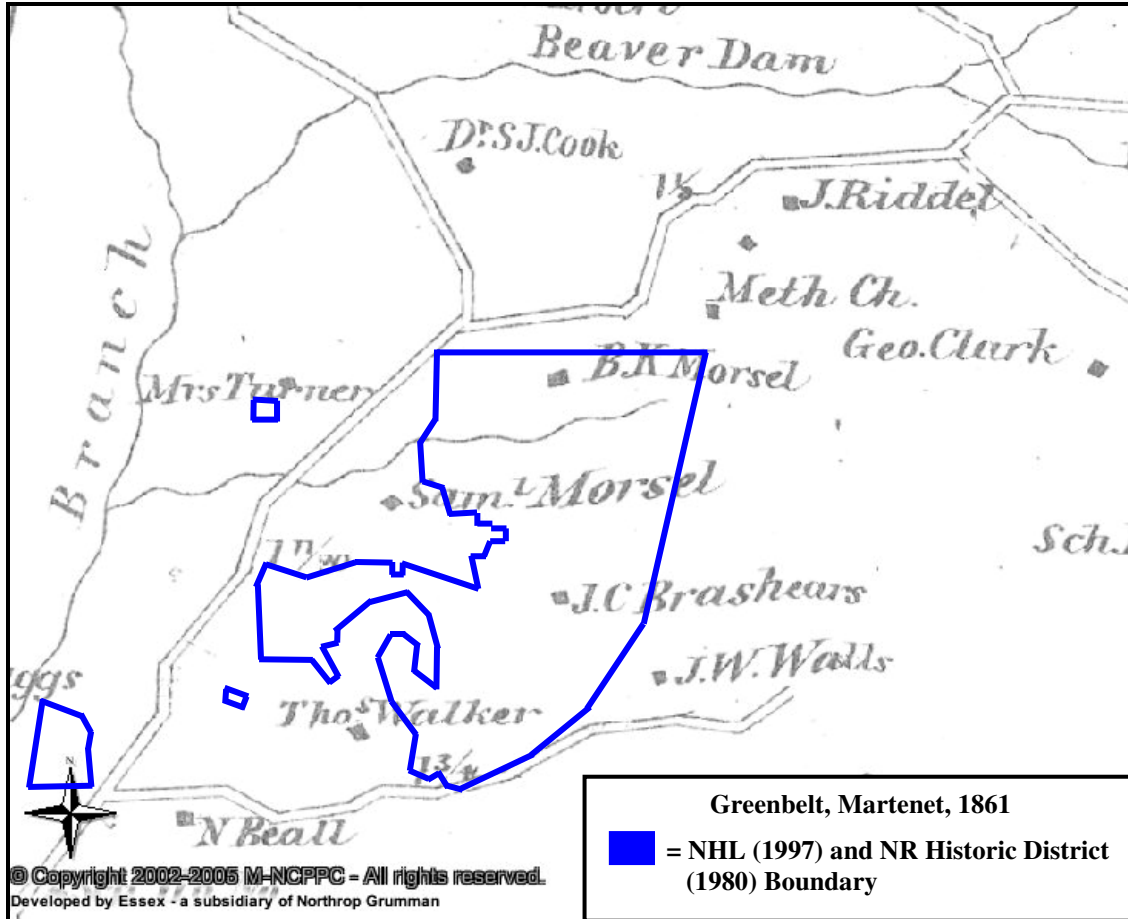
- (1)(A)(i) and (iv) – Greenbelt is significant as one of three New Deal-era planned communities in the United States, designed as a “green town” by the federal government. Greenbelt was designed as a utopian working-class commuter suburb developed as part of a government-sponsored program to provide affordable housing and job opportunities for the middle class. Greenbelt is also significant for its characteristics as a planned community that incorporates residential, commercial, recreational, agricultural, and industrial zones. As part of the growing militarization related to World War II (1941-1945) in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, Greenbelt was selected as the site of 1,000 units of defense housing to support the government's defense workers. Furthermore, the three cemeteries located within the National Register Historic District and NHL are reminders of the rural past of the area that became Greenbelt.
- (2)(A)(i) – Greenbelt is significant as a planned community with unified architecture and contains significant examples of Art Deco and Streamline Moderne architecture.
- (2)(A)(iv) – As a district, Greenbelt exemplifies the characteristics of a planned utopian community. The variety of residential, commercial, recreational, and religious buildings are part of a self-sufficient community developed as a result of New Deal-era reforms.

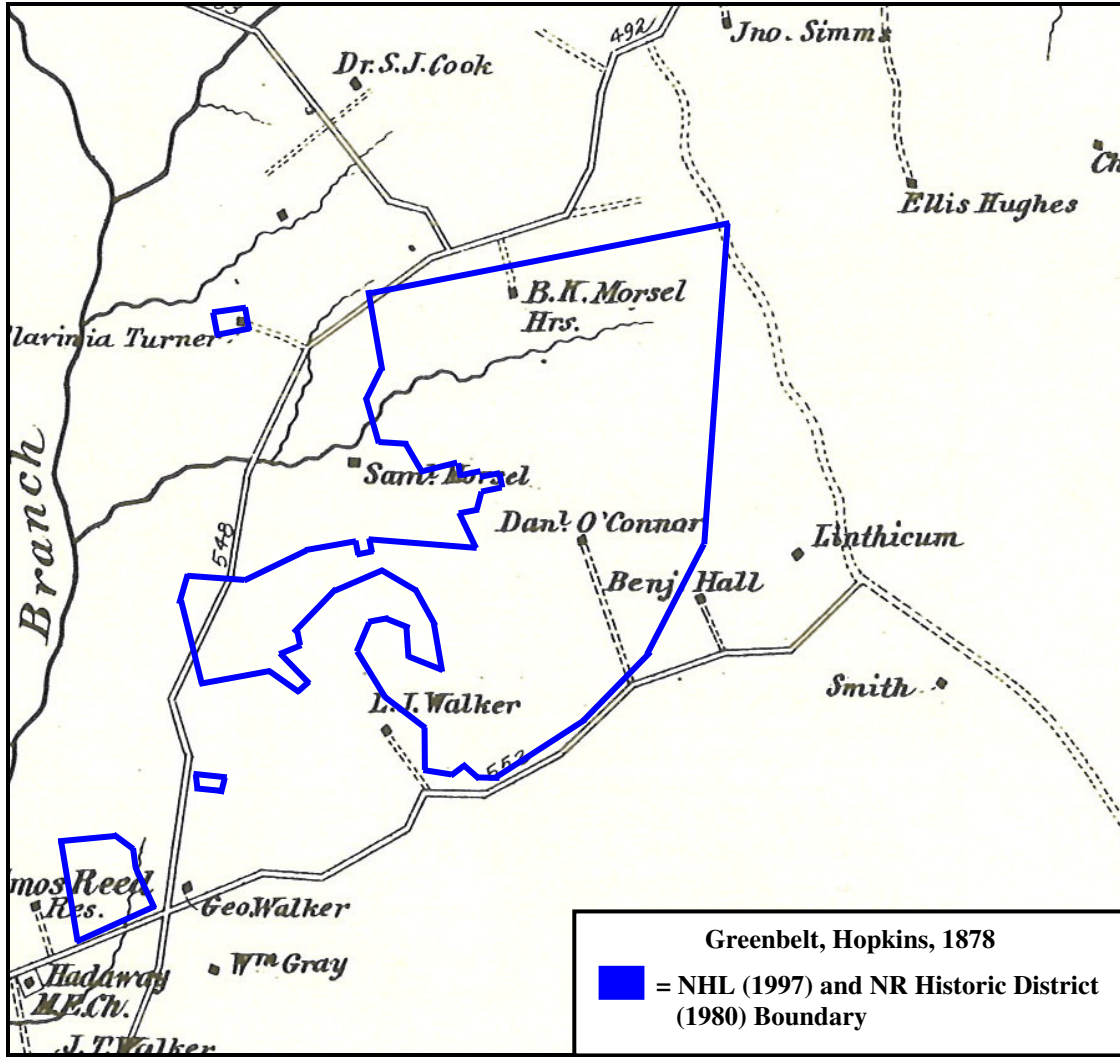
Prepared by EHT Tracerics, Inc.
November 2007

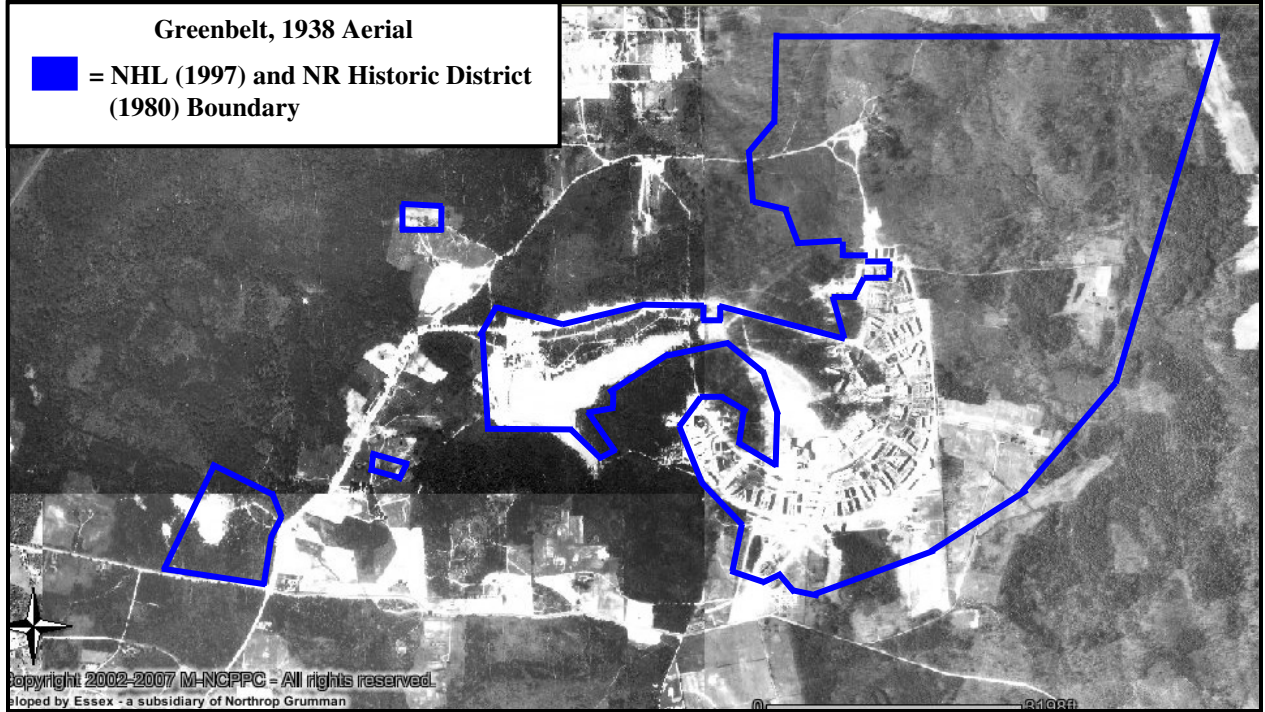
¹⁴ Hauenstein, “Greenbelt,” 7:13.

¹⁵ Lampl, “Greenbelt,” 7:5.











Looking southwest, 8A-D Hillside Road (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking northeast, 4 Laurel Hill Road (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking southwest, 5 Laurel Hill Road (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Hamilton Cemetery (PG: 67-004-03c) (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking southeast, 14 Crescent Road (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking northwest, Greenbelt Center School (PG: 67-004-01), 15 Crescent Road (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking southeast, 24-26 Crescent Road (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking north, 129 Centerway Road, Old Greenbelt Theatre at Roosevelt Center (*EHT Traceries, 2007*)



Looking northeast along Centerway Road, Roosevelt Center (*EHT Traceries, 2007*)



Looking west, 1 Hillside Road, Greenbelt Community Church (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking south, 135 Crescent Road, St. Hugh's Catholic Church (*EHT Traceries, 2007*)



Looking west, Turner Cemetery (PG: 67-004-03b), off of Ivy Lane, west of Kenilworth Avenue
(*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking northeast, Walker Cemetery (PG: 67-004-03a) (*EHT Traceries*, 2007)



Looking west, 8950 Edmonston Road, Greenbelt Middle School (*EHT Traceries, 2007*)