



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Thornton, having grown as a unique community over almost seven decades, seeks to build public appreciation of its history and identity and encourage the preservation and interpretation of physical elements that reflect its history. Once dubbed the “City of Planned Progress,” the Historic Preservation Plan (HPP or Plan) aims to embody Thornton’s original motto by clearly outlining policy and recommendations that can advance the “planned progress” of a historic preservation program.

Having surpassed its 50th anniversary, Thornton continues to grow into a distinct community as more than a suburb of Denver. A 50th anniversary for a city represents an important marker for historic preservation programs as a typical national qualifier used for what is considered a “historic” structure is whether a building is 50 years old. In approaching its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Thornton continues to look toward the future to address its preservation goals. Starting in 2023, the city began a planning process to determine a framework for creating a historic preservation program resulting in this Historic Preservation Plan (HPP).

The land within Thornton’s current city limits and Future Growth Boundary, as identified in the Thornton Comprehensive Plan, is the official study area for this HPP; annexed land within Thornton’s current city limits is of higher priority than un-annexed land. The “Future Growth Boundary” is defined as “...the line on the Thornton Future Land Use Map that marks the extent of the Future Growth Area which includes all developed and undeveloped land within the area that the city is planning to grow.” This area is located largely in Adams County just north of the City of Denver, with a portion in Weld County to the north. Thornton was incorporated as a home-rule municipality in 1956 and now includes approximately 38 square miles within its current boundaries (i.e., city limits). This is a Colorado landscape with a rich history, evidence of which is still discernible within the modern community.

## The Evolution of Thornton's Landscape

Thornton's own history begins with its development between 1952 and 1964. This occurred within a time known among historic preservationists as the "mid-century modern" era, roughly 1945 to 1969. The area in the city of Thornton that developed beginning in 1952 is known today as "Original Thornton," north of 88th Street (now 88th Avenue). Today, the city owns several properties within the founding neighborhood of Original Thornton including the first purpose-built city hall at 9471 Dorothy Boulevard, built in 1959. Original Thornton remains an intact neighborhood of ranch-style, brick homes and connects the community to the time and place of Thornton's origins.



*Homes under construction in the Original Thornton subdivision.*

Thornton's landscape is also of historic interest. Indigenous Peoples called the region home long before European settlement, most recently Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute tribes. American Indian cultural traditions may also be expressed within Thornton today, which should be identified and incorporated into modern historic preservation programming. Expression of other populations in the landscape should be explored as various historic contexts are examined. Danish, German, Italian, Japanese, Mexican, Russian, and other immigrant groups, for example, are all known to contribute to the history of Thornton and Adams County.

European settlement in the Adams County region occurred after Colorado's start in 1858 (with the discovery of gold at the mouth of Little Dry Creek, a tributary to the South Platte River). Gold may have driven initial settlement, but miners had to eat, and farmers and stock growers soon followed. The South Platte Valley in which Thornton is sited became Colorado's richest agricultural region. Railroads and irrigation, both supporting further agricultural growth, arose within only a few years after the end of the United States' Civil War in 1865. Up until the 1940-50s, much of the landscape within Thornton reflected these earlier times. Today, the city owns several properties significant to this heritage, including the Eastlake Farmers' Co-operative Elevator (listed in the National Register), the Rietzenstein Barn and Big Dry Creek open space (listed as a Thornton historic landmark), and the Lambertson Lakes Homestead.



*The Rietzenstein Barn within the Big Dry Creek Open Space was constructed in 1923 and has been well preserved.*

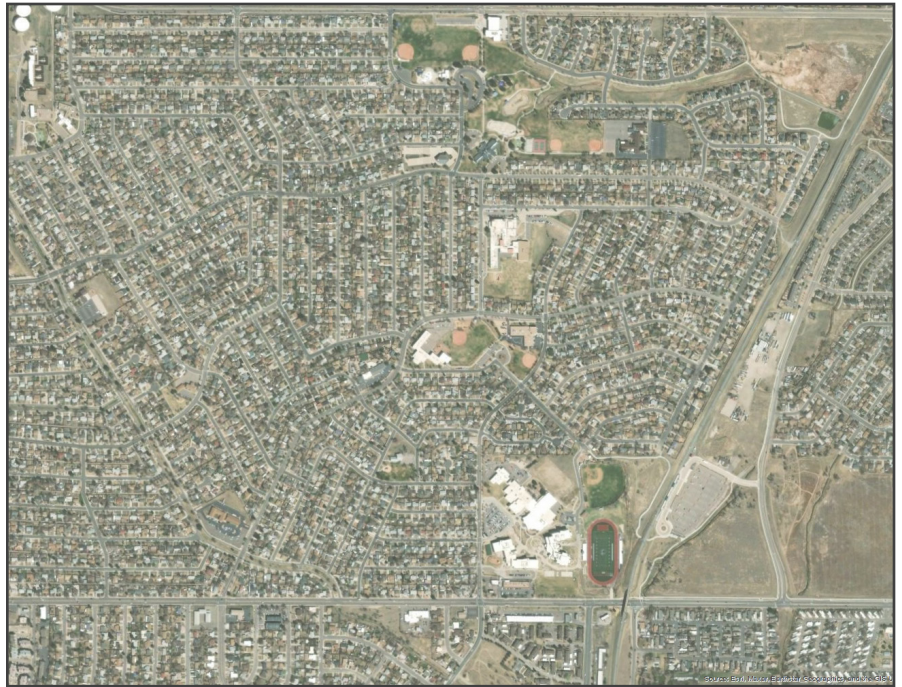
Eastlake itself is a significant reminder of the agricultural landscape where Thornton originated.

The city's formation as a local government in 1956 followed four years of the early development of Original Thornton. At that time, this area was a community of modest brick homes, many occupied by military veterans and their families who were flocking to the Denver area after World War II and the Korean War. Job opportunities for veterans at that time and in that area were plentiful. Thornton's development pattern has followed the earliest suburban form of



neighborhood development established by developer Sam Hoffman, who led Father and Son Construction (F & S Construction). Many of the successive neighborhoods in Thornton, built by a variety of developers following Hoffman, exhibit the same pattern of curvilinear streets and detached, single-family homes on separate lots. The details of each successive neighborhood have changed over time, reflecting the years in which each was built.

As a city that developed after the development of the automobile, Thornton's commercial spaces reflect the sprawling patterns of car-oriented development typical of mid-century places. For example, Thornton's first commercial center, known as the Thornton Shopping Center, was built as an auto-oriented shopping center. As Thornton continues to develop across a large area of land, scattered nodes of commercial development have occurred. Over time, with city guidance on future investment, these areas can be preserved and oriented not only to the car, but also to neighborhood services and walkability. Preservation could support these various commercial efforts in consideration of long-time businesses and with regard to architecturally and culturally significant buildings deemed important by the community. Moreover, there is space in some of these areas for additional commercial development. Enhancements of these spaces and connections will sustain the city's many neighborhoods as they grow older.



*Aerial photograph of the Original Thornton area, representing the curvilinear street pattern and lot distribution typical of Thornton's first neighborhoods.*

## **Planning Guidance**

The Thornton Comprehensive Plan outlines an extensive vision for the city's future. Much of the needed guidance to create the HPP is derived from the city's Comprehensive Plan. The 2020 Comprehensive Plan vision states, "Thornton's Comprehensive Plan...serves as the long-term vision and road map for the community's future. The Comprehensive Plan is used to guide and align public and private investments in Thornton with the shared vision and values of the community, and to provide policy direction on a variety of topics that affect the quality of life of our community – including housing, transportation, recreational and cultural amenities, employment opportunities, and more. The Comprehensive Plan serves as a foundational tool that guides the community toward its desired outcomes and is meant to be a 'living document' that should be revisited and updated over time to meet the changing conditions and evolving needs of our community."

The Comprehensive Plan guides all other city plans, including the HPP. The Historic Recognition Code (Chapter 19 of the Thornton City Code) also helps to implement the Comprehensive Plan and could similarly be used to implement the HPP.

The following vision for historic preservation has guided the development of this HPP and will continue to help shape decision making as Thornton's historic preservation program evolves.

# Vision Statement

*Historic preservation enables Thornton to cultivate its identity and image by building community awareness of the history and landscape in which Thornton is centered. Successful historic preservation includes fair and inclusive public engagement, conservation of historic resources that support Thornton’s sense of place, and investment in resources and activities that make Thornton’s quality of life unique.*

Five broadly stated goals are embodied in the strategies and recommendations presented in subsequent chapters of this Plan:

<b>Goal 1</b>	Preserve historic places, buildings, neighborhoods, and landscapes that contribute to Thornton’s cultural heritage and unique identity.
<b>Goal 2</b>	Recognize and celebrate Thornton’s cultural diversity and the places that support community traditions.
<b>Goal 3</b>	Increase Thornton’s historic preservation staffing capabilities, volunteer base and volunteer recruitment, and grant writing capabilities to bolster historic preservation activities.
<b>Goal 4</b>	Engage Thornton residents in activities that magnify public appreciation for Thornton’s history and historic resources.
<b>Goal 5</b>	Provide affordable, economical, and sustainable development opportunities for Thornton residents and businesses through historic preservation.

## Overview of this Plan

Providing a framework to create a fully functioning historic preservation program for Thornton residents is a primary aim of this Plan. Such a program should make use of the many tools of historic preservation practice. Historic preservation encompasses a wide variety of professions, trades, and areas of study. As a new and developing program in Thornton, it is important to create a baseline understanding of what principles can be used to frame the Plan. Ultimately, a desired result of this Plan is a program design that enables Thornton to qualify as a Certified Local Government (CLG) under state and federal historic preservation rules, as explained in Chapter 3.

Below is a summary of the HPP's chapters and a brief description of the chapter.

- **Chapter 1** provides the Plan's **vision and goals** that guided the development of all subsequent chapters. To guide the direction of Thornton's preservation approach, staff conducted public outreach and engagement throughout the development of the HPP, as described in this chapter.
- **Chapter 2** is an examination of the **historic context** and evolution of historic resources in Thornton. This chapter is not meant to be a formal history for Thornton, but to indicate future research needs. It is intended to spark readers' imaginations about Thornton's place in the landscape and history of the Denver region.
- **Chapter 3** provides information on specific **historic preservation programming** for local, state and federal governments. The section below in this Executive Summary provides some of the "key ideas" from that chapter as they could apply to Thornton.
- **Chapter 4** suggests **best practices** regarding land use planning and historic preservation, mainly focused on properties owned by the city or policy areas a local government could impact. The city is the owner of a significant collection of historic and architecturally significant buildings.
- **Chapter 5** describes how to best **engage the public** in a preservation program. During community meetings and focus groups conducted for this HPP, participants expressed the wish to gain and share information about Thornton's history.
- **Chapter 6** compiles the Plan's **recommended actions** from various sections of this Plan in an easy-to-read table suggesting priorities and potential partnerships.

## Summary of Recommendations

Following are more details from the HPP's chapters that contain recommendations – those that describe the strategies to be followed as Thornton builds its historic preservation program.

### Chapter 3: Establishing Thornton's Historic Preservation Program

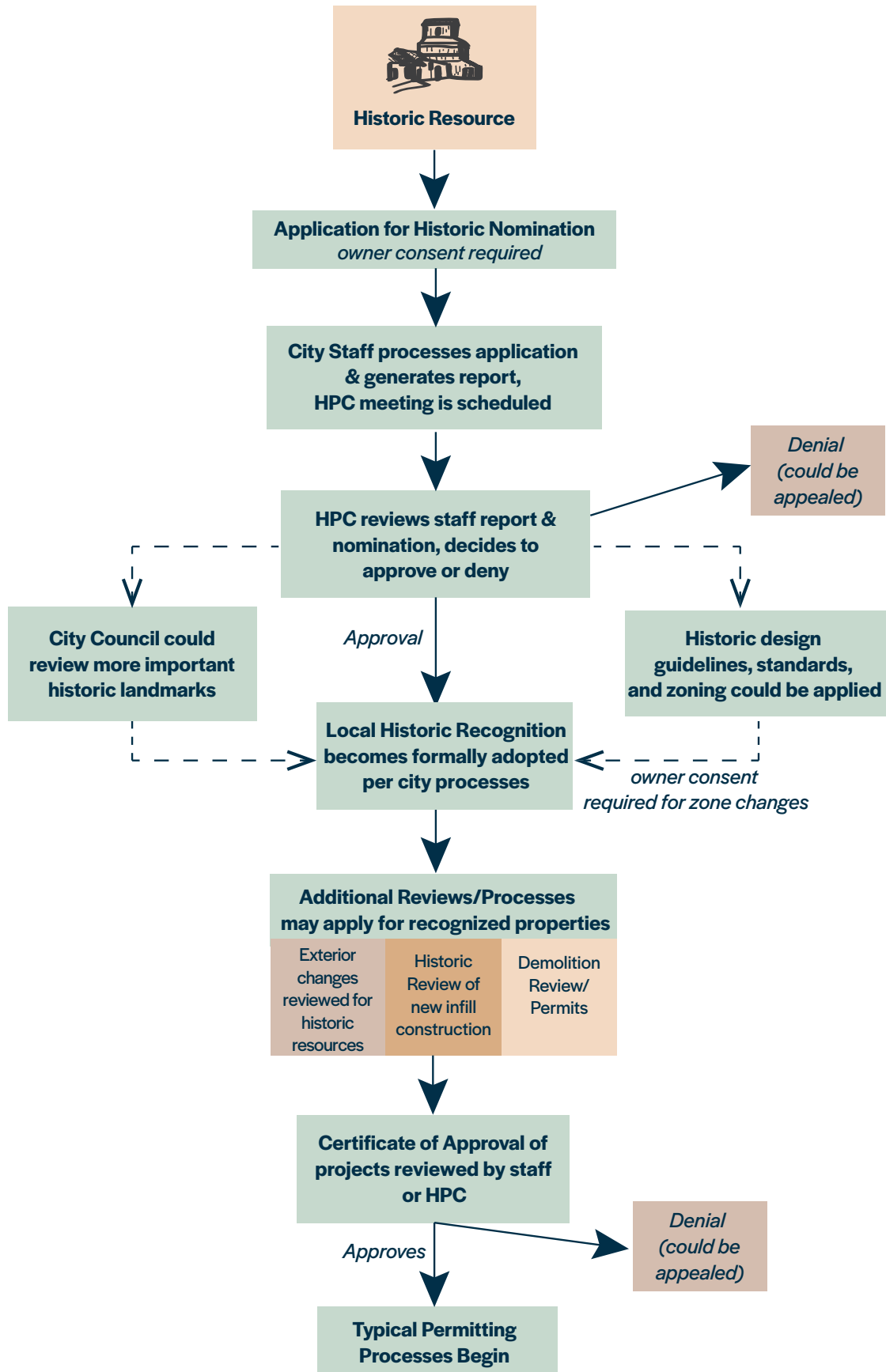
In building its new program, Thornton can rely on a local, state, and national framework for historic preservation found in communities across the United States. It is recommended that the program focus on surveying Original Thornton, re-surveying Eastlake and its surrounding landscape, and a number of other practical steps to build the city's knowledge of its historic resources and sensitive archaeological areas. A number of places in Thornton may be found to be eligible for the National Register, as determined during research for this Plan (The National Register places no restrictions on what an owner, other than the federal government, may do with their property up to and including destruction, unless the property is involved in a project that receives federal assistance. Reviews of such projects in Colorado are coordinated by History Colorado, the State Historic Preservation Office [SHPO]).

Ultimately, surveys and research may support establishing further recognition of historic resources. To better protect historic resources and to become a Certified Local Government (CLG), described below, changes to the city's Historic Recognition Code (Chapter 19) would be needed. Such changes are



*Eastlake is a significant reminder of the agricultural landscape where Thornton originated and home to this grain elevator which is listed on the National Register.*

**Figure ES.1 - Possible Format of a Historic Preservation Program**



**Figure ES.1** displays a flow chart of a potential local historic recognition process Thornton could consider. A review process can still be established without a Historic Preservation Commission (HPC), but the flow chart would look different. The city's current Historic Recognition Code (Ch. 19) in the City Code has City Council as the final approval of recognition, for example.

recommended in this Plan but would require further consideration by Thornton’s City Council and are considered outside of the creation of this HPP.

#### **Chapter 4: Best Practices in City Planning to Support Historic Preservation**

Recommended initiatives described in this chapter are meant to enhance the historic resources owned by the city and to support neighborhoods and business areas while also preserving the city’s heritage. As the principal owner of a significant portfolio of historic properties, the city should also commit to three best practices in historic preservation:

- (1) Following the ‘Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties’ in undertaking all maintenance and alterations (see page ES.9).
- (2) Compiling thorough information to guide management decisions for Thornton’s historic buildings.
- (3) Organizing historic preservation efforts around professional experts, either internal or external, who could provide support.

#### **Chapter 5: Engaging the Public**

Community involvement in historic preservation efforts is vital. One desired outcome of this Plan would be to engage residents, enable the interpretation of Thornton’s history, and promote education about its heritage. Objectives include:

- (1) Building public appreciation for Thornton’s character of place, its mid-20th-century architecture, and its historic resources in general.
- (2) Providing engaging stories about the people and communities embedded in Thornton’s places and landscapes.
- (3) Providing information to property owners about how to care for their older buildings.



*City of Thornton Infrastructure and Maintenance Center mural representing valuable members of our community.*



*One of the meetings held with stakeholders during the preparation of this plan.*

## Figure ES.2 The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation

**STANDARD 1** – A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.

**STANDARD 2** – The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.

**STANDARD 3** – Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken.

**STANDARD 4** – Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.

**STANDARD 5** – Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a historic property shall be preserved.

**STANDARD 6** – Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.

**STANDARD 7** – Chemical or physical treatments, such as sandblasting, that cause damage to historic materials shall not be used. The surface cleaning of structures, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible.

**STANDARD 8** – Significant archeological resources affected by a project shall be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures shall be undertaken.

**STANDARD 9** – New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.

**STANDARD 10** – New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

Further information is available at: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/taxincentives/secretarys-standards-rehabilitation.htm>

## The Key Ideas in this Historic Preservation Plan

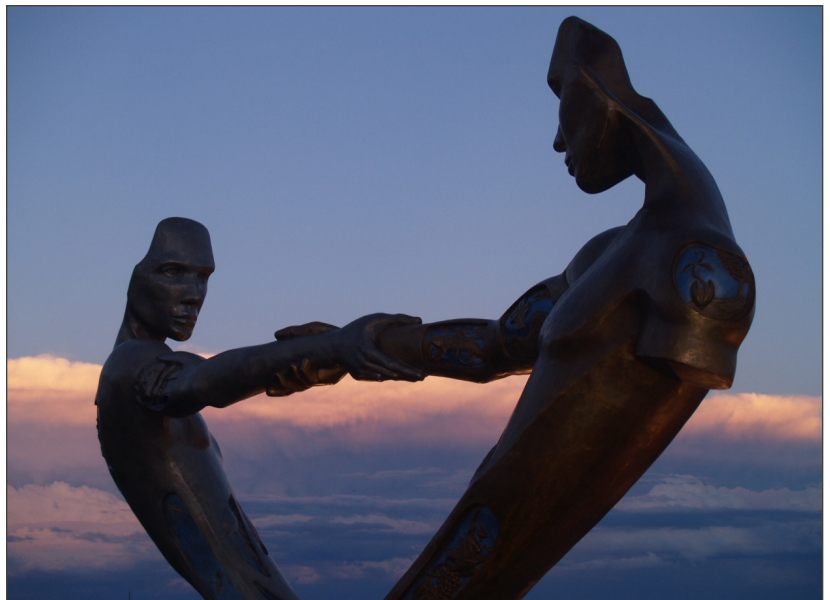
Throughout this Plan are a variety of best practices related to historic preservation and land use planning for the city. While these recommendations are not an all-encompassing list of the actions that can be taken to support historic preservation, they do provide a starting point for historic preservation efforts.

The HPP calls for the following set of key ideas to expand Thornton’s historic preservation efforts into a full-fledged program:

- (1) Establish a survey and nomination program**, in order to know which resources the city should work toward protecting, through National and Colorado State Register nominations and through local ordinance;
- (2) Expand the current historic preservation ordinance** from one that simply provides recognition for historic resources to one that may protect those resources through local project reviews according to local design standards, following “...basic procedures which comprehensively address preservation, but are not so burdensome so as to unduly impede planned growth.”<sup>1</sup>
- (3) Consider a Historic Preservation Commission** to help administer the local project reviews, participate in public educational activities, and work with History Colorado and the State Historic Preservation Office;
- (4) Achieve Certified Local Government status** upon establishment of the preservation ordinance and the preservation commission;
- (5) Seek State Historical Fund grants** to support Thornton’s preservation activities and projects; and
- (6) Increase existing staff capabilities and expand staff capacity where appropriate** to support historic preservation in Thornton.

## Executive Summary Conclusion

Thornton’s progress as a planned residential community before and after 1952 is a unique story that deserves greater awareness from Thornton’s residents. As the sixth largest municipality in Colorado, the history of this modern, still-growing community is a significant part of its identity. Understanding Thornton’s roots as an enduring legacy may also serve to influence the city’s plans for the future, as residents gain knowledge of how Thornton’s settlement pattern, sense of place, and community services grew over time.



*Communis (DiAnne Cooper, c. 2010, Bronze sculpture) outside of Thornton City Hall, i.e., Civic Center.*

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1 “Model Land Use Regulations, Chapter 7, Historical and Archaeological Resource Area Regulations,” p. 2; provided by the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, History Colorado, Publication #1301b. Available at <https://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2019/1301b.pdf>