

# Farming in the Sweet Spot: Integrating Interpretation, Preservation, and Food Production at National Parks

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FOOD PRODUCTION falls somewhere between the natural and the cultural, between resource bases of land, air, and water and human practices of cultivation and harvesting. This ambiguity creates particular challenges for the many national parks and heritage areas that incorporate farms, fisheries, ranches, orchards, and other types of working landscapes relating to food. Some of those challenges reflect long-running debates about whether public lands and waters should be kept in use or left alone, and if they are to be used, who should benefit and how. Other questions stem from the complexities of food itself—its essential role in human survival, its emotional and social as well as biological qualities, and the way it is interwoven with “sense of place” and specific ways of life, especially on small scales. The changing climate complicates things further, making subsistence and survival themselves less taken-for-granted than they once seemed to be.

Amid competing calls for expansion of large-scale industrialized agriculture on the one hand and a rebuilding of smaller-scaled local or regional food systems on the other, how should national parks best steward and interpret resources directly used in producing food? This article addresses that larger question through a case study: the agricultural lands within the recently expanded boundaries of Martin Van Buren National Historic Site (NHS) in Kinderhook, New York.<sup>1</sup> After a brief overview of the overlapping layers of ownership and use of Van Buren’s farmland, I explore some of the challenges the park and its partners face and the strategies they are using as they work toward a new model of shared land stewardship and interpretation.

## **Reassembling Van Buren’s farm**

In 1840, after a single term as president, Martin Van Buren returned to his small-town home and became a gentleman farmer in the mold of Thomas Jefferson and other agrarian advocates of the early republic. The land that Van Buren owned from 1839 until his death in 1862 had already been continuously farmed for centuries, with indigenous peoples cultivating

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food in the area long before the establishment of Dutch colonial farms in the 17th century. Van Buren grew apples, hay, potatoes, grains, meat, and dairy products for his household and for burgeoning commercial markets in New York and other regional cities.

Far from being a bucolic retreat from partisan politics, Van Buren's farming was a direct extension of his political career. He ran for president twice more, including on the 1848 Free Soil Party ticket, and tried to make his own farm a reflection of the ideals of "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor and Free Men" that undergirded northern opposition to the expansion of slavery in the new western states. He combined traditional Dutch-American farming knowledge with an embrace of then-cutting-edge techniques, aiming to demonstrate that supposedly tapped-out northeastern farmland could be made productive enough to compete successfully with larger farms then being established along the moving western frontier (Figure 1). In a pre-fossil-fuel era, those new techniques consisted of strategies we now think of as "organic," "natural," "regenerative," or "sustainable," like crop rotation and intensive fertilization ("Henceforth manure—manure—is the word," the former president wrote in an 1843 letter) intended to enhance soil health and productivity.<sup>2</sup>

Van Buren's carefully nurtured fields have remained in continuous agricultural use ever since, although the property itself became fragmented over the decades. By 1974, when the

**Figure 1.** Wayside exhibit at Martin Van Buren NHS interpreting the soil improvement techniques embraced by "progressive" farmers in the mid-19th century. Photo by the author.



national park was established on a small parcel of land that included Van Buren's mansion, most of the farmland was being cultivated by a farmer who produced market and commodity crops using chemical pesticides and fertilizers, many of them now banned. Until 2009, the park remained an island within this conventional farm, but preservationists' concerns about encroaching development led to a push for a boundary expansion to enclose nearly all of Van Buren's 200-plus acres within the park. The result is a complex mosaic of ownerships, easements, and uses, including a number of private homes and a working farm that owns and cultivates more than 100 acres within the park boundary as well as considerable additional acreage outside it. The National Park Service (NPS) also owns 25 acres of farmland directly behind the mansion; the working farm has a short-term lease on this parcel and its functional farm buildings, only one of which dates to Van Buren's period (Figure 2).

The current farmers are very different from their predecessors at the site, and they have been a crucial linchpin in the boundary expansion project. The farm sells directly to customers through a CSA (community supported agriculture) shareholder system and uses biodynamic methods, an organic approach that sees soil, plant, and animal life (including humans) as ecologically and socially intertwined. While by no means identical to Martin Van Buren's

**Figure 2.** Aerial view of Martin Van Buren NHS, 2011. The 25-acre parcel where the park and farm operations overlap most closely can be seen across the top of the photo, with the modern farm buildings in the top left corner. Courtesy of NPS/Martin Van Buren NHS.





methods and philosophy, this comes much closer to the historical precedent than do farms that sell commodity foods in large-scale markets and rely heavily on human-made pesticides and fertilizers from off-farm sources.<sup>3</sup> The regenerative techniques used on the farm also align closely with NPS's own preference for strategies that foster biodiversity and minimize the use of chemicals. Another key partner in the boundary expansion was a large regional land trust, which helped facilitate the purchase of the farmland and negotiate agricultural easements that ensure it will remain in cultivation in perpetuity.<sup>4</sup> The land trust holds some of these easements and the park others; the sale of development rights helped the farmers purchase the acreage that they own outright.

From the outset, many of those involved in the 2009 boundary expansion could glimpse tantalizing possibilities for a new generation of interpretation and co-stewardship. They envisioned a partnership that would build on existing experiments around the national park system but integrate past and present resource uses even more closely, creating a win-win-win situation. In this vision, the park is able to present a more holistic, nuanced view of Martin Van Buren's life. Conservation interests are served by maintaining the historical character of a significant piece of the Hudson Valley's agricultural landscape, supporting the vigorous regional tourism sector as well as a local-food economy that follows historical precedent by selling both close to home and in New York City and other nearby cities. And the farmers gain secure tenure on prime farmland in a desirable and expensive real estate market. The differing imperatives of historic preservation, public land management, and working agriculture have made themselves felt in various ways as the partners have worked out the details of the new arrangement, but the ongoing process points toward exciting potential for renewing interpretive practices at this and other NPS sites that incorporate working lands or other food-related resources.

## Challenges

Many of the biggest challenges stem from the legacies of older interpretive and management paradigms rooted in sharp dichotomies between past and present, public and private, nature and culture, preservation and change. Despite many innovations around the national park system in the past three or four decades, those older patterns continue to surface in the continuing preference of many managers and planners for clear-cut plans and narratives rather than a tolerance for open-endedness and more porous boundaries. At bottom, the tension is between the concept of a static "period of significance" and the dynamism of participating in real-time systems—in this case, a food system shaped by the demands of commercial markets. Parks are created to preserve a particular aspect of the past, but food producers must continually adapt to changing conditions in ways that may require reshaping the resource being preserved and protected.

At Martin Van Buren NHS, this fundamental tension has manifested itself most clearly in negotiations about the 25-acre parcel that the working farm leases from NPS. This area contains a 19th-century farm cottage but also a number of 20th-century structures that are central to the farm's operations. Initially, park planning approached these as modern "intrusions" that should be razed as soon as possible in order to preserve (or rather, to re-create)

a sense of the Van Buren-era landscape in the historic core of the park. The farmers made it clear that the financial burden of building new infrastructure elsewhere on their own property would jeopardize their ability to stay afloat financially. Over time, the park's position on the functional 20th-century buildings has shifted as managers have embraced the more flexible paradigms discussed in the following section. But a recent revaluation of the parcel, leading to a steep rent hike, plus the fact that the current lease extends only to 2020 with possible one-year extensions to 2026, keeps this a vexed issue.

One key underlying reason it is so vexed is the assumption—encoded in the kinds of law and policy that NPS must abide by—of a clear-cut distinction between the missions and practices of a commercial entity like a farm and those of a public agency like the National Park Service. In theory, this separation is obvious: one exists to make money; the other does not. But in practice, the line is blurred by the complex and sometimes contradictory relationship of both parks and farms with capitalist markets. Recent scholarship on national parks underscores how park creation has historically been entangled with economic development or redevelopment projects, even as parks have also often been asked to mitigate or withstand the effects of market-driven changes.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, like most people in the cultural sector, farmers are motivated as often by love of their work as by purely financial considerations; those who stay in farming or go into it in the early 21st century are as much altruists as they are entrepreneurs.<sup>6</sup>

One of the main interpretive challenges at Martin Van Buren NHS has been how to understand Van Buren's own approach to farming in relation to a wider spectrum of ideas about agriculture in both the past and the present. In hindsight, the 19th-century "improvers" whose ideas Van Buren selectively adopted look a lot like contemporary sustainable farmers. But in their day, they saw themselves as modernizers who embraced the doctrines of efficiency and productivity that helped set American agriculture on the road to our current industrialized food system. How, then, to connect past and present without over-selling similarities that reflect very different—even contradictory—positions along that trajectory?

Farmers of all kinds tend to align themselves with the ideals of independent agrarianism—the same ideals that Martin Van Buren sought to uphold against both the opposing system of enslaved agricultural labor and the emerging realities of waged labor in an industrializing economy. Then as now, the iconic image of the self-directed American farmer stands in sharp contrast to the realities of industrialism and capitalism, which favor concentrations of wealth, efficiencies of scale, and consolidation of control.<sup>7</sup> Farmers have been wrestling with this conundrum—most baldly expressed in the "get big or get out" axiom of the 1970s and 1980s—for most of the past two centuries, with mixed results.<sup>8</sup> Whether they are tiny or gigantic, virtually all American farms are affected by the continual volatility of markets, and virtually all require some kind of subsidy or support to stay afloat.<sup>9</sup> The contemporary farm at Martin Van Buren's estate is part of a widespread questioning of the effects of market logic on the food system, but it is also caught within an economic and regulatory environment shaped by those two centuries of struggle. Small-scale farmers must contend with consumer expectations shaped by the convenience and choice provided by industrialized agriculture, while also following expensive requirements put in place to curb the most damaging practices of

enormous “factory farms.”<sup>10</sup> The for-profit/non-profit distinction structures much of what happens at a national park site where resources are being used for commercial food production, but it also obscures important questions about the complexities of the past and present of the U.S. food system and how NPS might interpret and deal with those complexities.

## Strategies

The park has approached these challenges in three main ways. First and perhaps foremost, key members of the park staff have been very committed to building a sense of trust and mutuality with the farmers cultivating Van Buren’s land. In part this commitment reflects NPS’s increased emphasis in recent decades on partnerships, sharing ownership and stewardship of resources, and engaging with civic and community issues. In a more basic sense, this is simple neighborliness: the park and the farm share space and interests, and everyone benefits from a congenial working relationship. At times the relationship-building process has been strained by internal NPS differences in assumptions and expectations, leadership changes, and clashing timetables, which have exacerbated the legal and financial challenges of working out the details of co-stewardship. But over the past eight years, good will and continuing commitment on both sides have sustained and strengthened the conversations. Other partners, particularly the land trust that facilitated the boundary expansion and the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, have played important roles in this process, as discussed in more detail below.

A second key strategy has been the commissioning of a carefully sequenced set of studies supporting the park’s shift from what was essentially a historic house museum to an active part of the region’s historical and contemporary farming sector.<sup>11</sup> A 2004 cultural landscape report by the NPS’s Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation thoroughly documented the agricultural uses of Van Buren’s farmland from the early Dutch colonial era to the turn of the 21st century. A 2006 scholarly historic resource study helped to update the park’s interpretive themes, particularly by showing how Van Buren’s post-presidential farming activities reflected sectional and ideological struggles of the antebellum period. Between 2009 and 2012, I was part of a team working on an ethnographic landscape study (ELS) that situated farming at Van Buren’s Lindenwald estate within the broader agricultural history of the surrounding county and region. A relatively new format in the Park Service, the ELS enables the documentation of not only land uses but cultural meanings and practices associated with them by particular park-associated people—in this case, area farmers. While farmers arguably are not a cohesive group of people in the same way that an ethnic or tribal community might be, there are important parallels, particularly because farming *does* constitute a particular way of life with a deep and continuous history in the Hudson Valley.

At the same time, there are as many divisions as similarities among farmers. The ELS and other studies have helped the park to parse the thorny question of how to situate Van Buren within that larger spectrum. By showing Van Buren to have been *au courant* with farm reform ideas and projects of his day that were connected with wider political struggles, the historical research has helped the park arrive at a workable characterization of the eighth president’s

farming activities. Park materials now describe him as a “progressive” farmer—progressive in the sense that he adhered to the Jeffersonian vision of agriculture as a cornerstone of American democracy. Literally, metaphorically, and politically, his soil-enhancing activities reflected a belief that the future of the nation depended on the viability of farms cultivated by free men. The connecting thread that has emerged is the soil itself, worked and enhanced—and at times overworked and depleted—for many centuries. Van Buren’s specific approach to nurturing soil fertility provides a strong, clear link not only with the current farmers’ biodynamic methods and contemporary sustainable farming more generally, but also with the Park Service’s guidelines for responsible land management. The park has come to understand the living, working farmland as a central cultural resource for communicating why this still-little-known president matters deeply within the span of American history.

Finally, the park has worked to encode its new partnerships and interpretive directions in internal planning documents to ensure that future managers understand why sustainable farming is a crucial strategy for preserving and interpreting this piece of U.S. history. A general management plan (GMP) process was taking place alongside much of the work described above, resulting in a 2015 document that favored a holistic approach to managing and interpreting the site, one which would allow visitors to “walk in the footsteps of Martin Van Buren—as eighth president, politician, progressive farmer and family man.”<sup>12</sup> The GMP sets out the broad strokes of this new approach, including its importance for stewardship and cultivation of this farmland in a time of radically changing climate patterns. The 2004 *Cultural Landscape Report* provided a basis for a 2016 treatment plan that similarly sets out the policy and philosophical frameworks for agricultural management at the site.<sup>13</sup>

One further document moves further into the details of what the partners understand to be “sustainable” methods and how those support the overlapping goals of interpreting Martin Van Buren’s life, preserving the working agricultural landscape, and maintaining the economic viability of current and future farmers at the site. As this article was being drafted, the Olmsted Center was finalizing a supplemental set of agricultural management guidelines knitting together the objectives and best practices of both sustainable agriculture and cultural landscape preservation. Although landscape architects have historically been among those advocating most strongly for land treatments emphasizing a particular period of significance, the Olmsted Center has been shifting toward more responsive models that can take into account the inescapably dynamic qualities of the meanings and uses that connect people with landscapes—what Nancy Rottle has called a “continuum and process” model.<sup>14</sup> The new guidelines build on emerging practices around the national park system where park resources are being used for active food production, perhaps most notably at Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Ohio where farmers cultivating 11 small farms within the park have been able to sign 60-year leases that offer far greater stability than the usual shorter-term NPS leases for farmers.<sup>15</sup> Building on the exceptional synergy of historical significance, landscape character, and compatible contemporary usage at Martin Van Buren NHS, Olmsted Center planners saw an opportunity to articulate how the tantalizing vision for holistic, relevant interpretation at the park could be captured in management practices on the ground. The agricultural man-

agement guidelines are intended for future managers, most of whom will likely not be farmers themselves and who will need to be brought into the ongoing conversation about both the “why” and the “how” of this project.

Some questions remain unresolved, particularly about the future use and management of the 25-acre parcel where the park and farm uses overlap most closely. Gaps will always remain between the layered histories of U.S. farming writ large, Martin Van Buren’s own farming, today’s sustainable farming movement, NPS mandates, and the needs and practices of the park’s specific farm partner. On a grander scale, the willingness or ability of those within the federal government to engage directly with questions about anthropogenic climate change—a context as pressing for contemporary farmers and citizens as sectional hostilities were for Martin Van Buren—may shift with changing political currents, undercutting some of the striking relevance of this site in the present. But food may prove to be an accessible enough entry-point to those questions that park visitors and area residents will find ways to connect the dots for themselves, particularly as the working farm is more fully integrated into the park’s interpretation.<sup>16</sup> The groundwork that has been laid so far hints at striking innovation to follow, pushing beyond limiting dichotomies (past/present, nature/culture, for-profit/non-profit) and engaging directly with the richly resonant generative land and landscape of this particular place.

## Endnotes

1. I am indebted to current and former staff at Martin Van Buren NHS, the NPS Northeast Ethnography Program, the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, Roxbury Farm, the Farmscape Ecology Program of Hawthorne Valley Farm, and others who have been involved in conversations about this project over the past several years. They have contributed immeasurably to my understanding of both agricultural history and the potential for historic sites to play a greater role in interpreting it.
2. Reeve Huston, “The ‘Little Magician’ after the Show: Martin Van Buren, Country Gentleman and Progressive Farmer, 1841–1862,” *New York History* (Spring 2004): 108.
3. Terms such as “conventional,” “industrial,” and “sustainable” turn out to be much less specific and more value-laden than they appear at first, and they often overlap in actual farming practices. For example, “big organic” farming essentially mirrors any other large-scale agriculture except in its avoidance of certain chemical pesticides or fertilizers, while small-scale farms that use chemical pesticides but sell in extremely local markets may contribute substantially to the viability and “sustainability” of a local or regional food system. “Regenerative” is a more specific term, referring to modes of farming that treat farms as holistic ecological systems and avoid the use of imported “inputs” by producing most or all of their own fertilizer, animal feed, and, sometimes, seed.
4. Open Space Institute, “OSI Protects a Scenic and Working Farm Adjacent to Historic Lindenwald,” press release, December 17, 2009. Online at [http://osi.convio.net/site/PageServer?pagename=PressRelease\\_12\\_17\\_09](http://osi.convio.net/site/PageServer?pagename=PressRelease_12_17_09).
5. For some accounts of this entangled relationship of park creation and economic development or redevelopment, which has sometimes involved attracting economic



activity to depressed or depopulated areas and sometimes protecting landscapes from too much development or visitation, see Robert W. Righter, *The Battle over Hetch Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Hal K. Rothman, *America's National Monuments: The Politics of Preservation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Marguerite Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity 1880–1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); Paul Schullery and Lee Whittlesey, *Myth and History in the Creation of Yellowstone National Park* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011); Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), and Anne Mitchell Whisnant, *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

6. I am particularly indebted to Brian Donahue for helping me to work through this crucial point. For more, see the interview with Donahue in Michelle Moon and Cathy Stanton, *Public History and the Food Movement: Adding the Missing Ingredient* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 79–83.
7. For a discussion of how the ideals of agrarianism continue to inform contemporary American farming, with a specific focus on the Hudson Valley, see Margaret Gray, *Labor and the Locavore: The Making of a Comprehensive Food Ethic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 15–40. Julie Guthman's *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) examines the same tension between agrarian ideals and capitalist markets.
8. For more on this fundamental tension within market-based agriculture, see R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD: Ivan R. Dee, 2002) and Moon and Stanton, *Public History and the Food Movement*, Chapters 3 and 4.
9. The best-known types of subsidy are the various state mechanisms designed to keep farmers solvent. Over time in the U.S., and particularly since the 1960s and 1970s, these mechanisms have favored strategies that expand the influence of “market forces” rather than curbing them. Leasing public lands, often at below-market rates, is another strategy used by many farmers; NPS leases a good deal of its farmable land, particularly for growing fodder crops like hay and corn. Contemporary food reformers point out that other forms of subsidy exist, including the use of low-wage seasonal labor, often by immigrants; off-farm income that offsets farm losses or low returns; and spill-over affluence from “locavore” shoppers or well-to-do landowners who are able to support smaller-scale farming. Arguably, Martin Van Buren and other “gentleman farmers” of the past and present are among these.
10. For an exploration of this tension, see Joel Salatin, *Everything I Want to Do Is Illegal: War Stories from the Local Food Front* (Swoope, VA: Polyface Farm, 2007).
11. See Leonard L. Richards, Marla R. Miller and Eric Gilg, *A Return to His Native Town: Martin Van Buren's Life at Lindenwald, 1839–1862*, Historic Resource Study, with site review reports by Sean Wilentz, Reeve Huston, and Jonathan Earle (Boston: National

Park Service, 2006); Llerena Searle, *A Farmer in His Native Town: Cultural Landscape Report for the Martin Van Buren Farmland* (Boston: Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, 2004); and Cathy Stanton, *Plant Yourself in My Neighborhood: An Ethnographic Landscape Study of Farming and Farmers in Columbia County, New York* (Boston: National Park Service Northeast Ethnography Program, 2012). Other recent related studies at the park include a Turf Management Plan (2010) and an ethnohistory of Mahican Indians in the Kinderhook area (2011).

12. National Park Service, *General Management Plan Environmental Assessment, Martin Van Buren National Historic Site* (Boston: National Park Service, 2015), 63.
13. Alexandra von Bieberstein and Margie Coffin Brown, *Cultural Landscape Report for Martin Van Buren National Historic Site, Volume II: Updated Treatment Plan and Record of Treatment* (Boston: Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, 2016).
14. Nancy D. Rottle, "A Continuum and Process Framework for Rural Historic Landscape Preservation: Revisiting Ebey's Landing on Whidby Island, Washington" in Richard Longstreth, ed., *Cultural Landscapes: Balancing Nature and Heritage in Preservation Practice* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 129–149.
15. For a listing of these, see Rolf Diamant and Alex Romero, *Parks Where Farms and Food Matter: A Report from the October 2010 Northeast/National Capital Regional Conference Affinity Group* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, March 2011). Key sites that are relevant to this article include Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve on Whidbey Island in Washington state, Point Reyes National Seashore north of San Francisco, Marsh–Billings–Rockefeller National Historical Park in Vermont, and Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Ohio.
16. This is the premise of Moon and Stanton's *Public History and the Food Movement*; see especially pp. 2–5, "Why Start with Food?"

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