

Stephen C. Gordon's *How to Complete the Ohio Historic Inventory*

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In 1926, Wendell P. Dabney discovered to his great surprise that, “apart from tradition, a few scattered church notes, and the recollections of several survivors of the past, there was little Negro history” in the documents he found while researching for *Cincinnati's Colored Citizens*.¹ Historians today focusing on minority groups are all too familiar with this dilemma, often forced into utilizing sources more creative than orthodox to incorporate the underrepresented into the traditional narrative. However, even with these new research techniques, it is common to forget about one of the most telling and informative sources: architecture. This occurs because most local historians do not feel knowledgeable enough to survey and research architecture and structures on their own, regardless of familiarity with their area's past. While it is important to note that true understanding of architectural history requires significant academic training, Stephen C. Gordon's guide on *How to Complete the Ohio Historic Inventory* places the fundamentals of Ohio architectural history and interpretation into the hands of local historians, organizations, students, and volunteers.

The intent of Gordon's book is to aid surveyors in the step-by-step process of completing the Ohio Historic Inventory—a statewide inventory including buildings, structures, and sites older than fifty years. Like the Inventory itself, Gordon acknowledges early on in the book that his manual is still evolving, thereby allowing his writing to take on a self-aware nature required in the constantly-changing field of history. His

piece came in the early nineties at a good time in local surveying, as a manual on the Ohio Historic Inventory hadn't been written since the original in 1976 by Robert D. Loversidge. Understandably, practices within the Inventory would change dramatically from the seventies to the nineties, and many community surveyors now find that surveys from the seventies need to be reevaluated due to period biases and interpretations (such as the exclusion of minority histories) as we come closer and closer to adding buildings from the seventies into the Inventory themselves. This does, of course, pose several problems for Gordon's book, as we are now two and a half decades out from its publication. It has almost become necessary to address the inevitability of rewriting forms and resurveying properties to check for what might have been missed; if, as Gordon says, updates and additions are truly being made to his guide, a section on evaluating surveys which will, within the decade, soon themselves become historic, should prove fruitful to social and minority historians. If there have already been additions made, it is challenging to know where, and perhaps a footnote or section list included in the appendix indicating changes would be indicative of the document's livelihood and relevance.

His book is divided into nine sections, and visual aids, like verbal glossaries and pictures guiding in architectural and elemental identification (some of which seem to have been recycled from Loversidge's manual as he is included in the illustrations credit) break up the text effectively. These visual aids are easy to understand, and are what make the book particularly accessible to those historians with little to no architectural

background. The first two sections focus on how to conduct a survey and fill out the inventory form, while the next three aid in using architectural and structural terminology, as well as identifying architectural styles and historic building types. The last four sections are intended primarily for reference, including sample inventory forms and reading suggestions, alongside aiding in recording engineering structures, industrial structures, and landscapes. The extensive reading suggestions are subcategorized into purposes and types of reading, but does seem to lack further readings on specific architectural styles rather than general American architecture, and is thus a reference section which could be improved.

Gordon especially succeeds in humanizing the process of survey and Inventory work, including common mistakes made by surveyors, how to avoid redundancy, the acknowledgement of important steps most frequently forgotten, and the challenges of understanding a building's many contemporaneous contexts. His advice and suggestions, clearly discovered through personal experience, bring to life the inherent benefits of why we as historians need both the Inventory and the fundamental skills to completing its forms. Perhaps unintentionally, Gordon has provided local historians the tools to understanding the buildings around them when documents simply are not sufficient. *How to Complete the Ohio Historic Inventory* can and should be used by more than just surveyors, and reminds historians that, when you cannot find documents in the archives, access to physical heritage is sometimes only a photo away. ■

¹Wendell P. Dabney, *Cincinnati's Colored Citizens: Historical, Sociological, and Biographical* (Cincinnati: The Dabney Publishing Company, 1926), 4.

²Stephen C. Gordon, *How to Complete the Ohio Historic Inventory* (Columbus: Ohio Historic Preservation Office, 1992), 9.

³Robert D. Loversidge, Jr., *Ohio Historic Inventory Manual*, 1976.