

REVIVAL

Researching a Historic Building

A practical guide for Ohio small towns



WHY THIS MATTERS

Buildings are historical records.

Old buildings hold information that may never have been written down. Archives fill in other pieces. Good building research brings the two together.

In the building

- A blocked doorway can reveal an earlier floor plan
- Changes in brickwork can show an expansion
- An old stair can point to former upper-floor apartments or offices

In the archive

- Maps show when a building appeared or changed
- Newspapers and directories name past occupants
- Photographs and oral histories preserve what's been lost

INVENTORY VS. RESEARCH

Start with the inventory. Then dig deeper.

Inventory: What do we have?

- Address, parcel and owner
- Current use and vacancy
- General condition
- Available space, for sale or lease
- Redevelopment potential

Research: What can we learn?

- How old is it, and how has it changed?
- Who owned or occupied it?
- What happened here?
- What physical evidence remains?
- Why might it matter to the community?

Inventory identifies the resource. Research helps us understand it.

What this guide does — and doesn't do

It creates

A preliminary community historic-building record

A starting point for more research, preservation planning, interpretation, rehabilitation or professional evaluation.

It is not

- A National Register nomination or eligibility determination
- A Historic Structure Report
- An architectural, engineering or code assessment
- A building inspection

The goal isn't to turn volunteers into preservation consultants. It's to help people **observe carefully, collect evidence, separate evidence from interpretation**, and know when to call a professional.

THE PROCESS

Six steps — rarely a straight line.

01

LOOK

Start with what you can see.

02

RECORD

Document what exists today.

03

RESEARCH

Search for historical evidence.

04

COMPARE

Bring the evidence together.

05

INTERPRET

Understand what it means.

06

ACT

Put the research to work.

A newspaper article may send you back to a map. A photograph may explain something you noticed on site. Physical evidence may challenge what the archives said. **That's normal.**

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Ask four questions — every step of the way.

1 • OBSERVATION

What can I actually see?

The second floor has a row of six window openings.

2 • EVIDENCE

What does a source tell me?

A photo dated c. 1915 shows six similarly placed second-floor windows.

3 • INTERPRETATION

What does the evidence suggest?

The upper façade layout likely survives from at least the early 1900s.

4 • QUESTION

What don't I know yet?

Are the windows historic, or replacements in the original openings?

An unanswered question is more useful than an unsupported answer.

STEP 01 OF 06

01

LOOK

Start with what you can see.

Start with the building.

Outside

- Materials and roof form
- Storefront and entrances
- Door and window patterns
- Cornices, parapets, signs
- Additions and alterations

Inside, with permission

- Floor or ceiling changes
- Old or removed stairs
- Infilled doors and windows
- Patches in walls or floors
- Abandoned mechanicals

Record the evidence, not the cause.

Not “This doorway was added in 1950.” Instead: “Masonry around this doorway differs from the adjacent wall; the opening may have been altered.”

STEP 02 OF 06

02

RECORD

Document what exists today.

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General to specific.

1 • CONTEXT

The whole building, its place on the block, side and rear walls.

2 • CLOSER

Storefront, entrances, upper façade, major rooms, stairs.

3 • DETAILS

Masonry changes, blocked openings, ghost signs, old systems.

Name every photo

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Address, date, number — plus a simple photo log.

Record what you can't see

“No historic feature exists here” and “This area could not be observed” are not the same conclusion.

03

RESEARCH

Search for historical evidence.

Different sources answer different questions.

Source	What it can tell you
Historic photographs	Storefronts, signs, features since lost
Sanborn fire insurance maps	Footprint, materials, use, changes
Historic newspapers	Openings, fires, ads, sales, renovations
City and business directories	Who was at an address, and when
Deeds and property records	Ownership — not construction dates
Local histories and archives	Clippings, scrapbooks, anniversary books
Oral histories	Past uses, lost walls, untold stories
Census and genealogy	Who the people were and what they did

Research the people and businesses, **not just the address.**

A SIMPLE RESEARCH LADDER

Start local. Then expand.

You don't need every source for every building. Follow the evidence.



DON'T FORCE THE ANSWER

Record what the evidence supports.

THE EVIDENCE

Not on the 1895 Sanborn map. Present on the 1907 map.

Record: Built after 1895 and by 1907.

Not: “Built in 1900.”

THE EVIDENCE

One source says 1936. Another says 1937.

Record: Circa 1936–1937, based on available sources.

Not: Picking the date you prefer.

Good research isn't measured by how many blanks you fill. **It's measured by how clearly you can explain what the evidence supports.**

STEP 04 OF 06

04

COMPARE

Bring the evidence together.

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Build a timeline.



Built 1895–1907, likely c. 1902

Addition: 1915–1924

Put dates, owners, uses, physical changes and sources side by side. Research narrows dates gradually — and patterns appear that no single source shows.

WHEN THE BUILDING AND THE RECORDS DISAGREE

Buildings are primary sources, too.

1

Record the disagreement

Don't erase the inconvenient source.

2

Consider the source

Who made it, when and why? How close was it to the event?

3

Find independent evidence

Another photo, map, directory, deed or physical feature.

4

State only what it supports

"Available evidence does not establish the exact date" is useful research.

Change isn't loss of history. Most buildings in active use have changed. At this stage the job is to understand what changed, when, and what survives — not to judge it.

STEP 05 OF 06

05

INTERPRET

Understand what the evidence means.

Find the larger story.

A USEFUL FACT

"A hardware store operated here for fifty years."



AN INTERPRETATION

"It illustrates locally owned retail as the town grew into a regional commercial center."

Downtown development

Commerce

Industry

Agriculture

Transportation

Upper-floor housing

Civic and social life

Architecture

Significance comes from a building's relationship to a larger story — its **historic context** — not its age or looks. Then support it with research. **Don't make the story bigger than the evidence allows.**

NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA

Questions, not verdicts.

A

Events and patterns

Tied to events or broad patterns — downtown growth, industry, transportation, commerce?

B

People

Meaningfully tied to a person's important work — not just a visit or brief ownership?

C

Design and construction

A notable style, type, method, craftsmanship or designer? It needn't be elaborate.

D

Information potential

Could it reveal important information about the past? Usually archaeological.

A preliminary community record does not determine National Register eligibility. That takes professional evaluation.

WHAT REMAINS?

Integrity isn't condition.

A deteriorated building can retain a lot of historic integrity. A beautifully renovated one may retain very little.

Location Still where the history happened?	Design Is its historic form still readable?	Setting Do its surroundings help tell the story?	Materials Do historic materials survive?
Workmanship Is historic craft still visible?	Feeling Does it convey its historic period?	Association Can it still be tied to that history?	Not all or nothing What changed, what survives — and does it still tell the story?

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Choose your words carefully.

✓ Use

- “Research indicates...”
- “Available evidence suggests...”
- “The property may be associated with...”
- “The building retains...”
- “Additional research is needed to determine...”

⚠ Avoid, unless established

- “This building is historically significant.”
- “This property is National Register eligible.”
- “This is the oldest... first... only...”

“Source states the business was the town’s oldest as of 1988” is stronger documentation than “This was the town’s oldest business.”

What happens when the history is hidden?



1 • LOOK

Metal siding hid the upper façade. Little of its age showed from the street.



2 • RESEARCH

Historic photos showed the earlier masonry façade, openings and signage.



3 • COMPARE

Selective removal revealed surviving yellow brick and former openings.

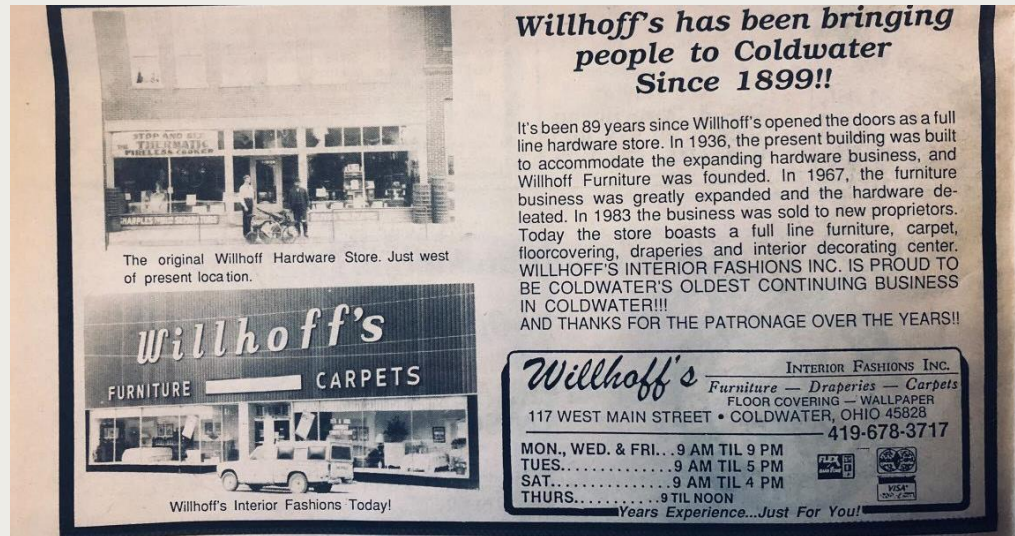


4 • ACT

Evidence guided preservation, restoration and reconstruction of the façade.

CASE EXAMPLE • THE WILLHOFF

No single source told the whole story.



WHEN SOURCES DISAGREE

A local history says 1937. This later ad says 1936.
Recorded as **c. 1936–1937**.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

What did the building look like?

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

What remains behind the siding?

INTERPRETATION

What survives, and what was altered or lost?

ACTION

An informed plan for the façade.

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STEP 06 OF 06

06

ACT

Put the research to work.

Give the research a future.

The building record

- Address, name, current photos
- Physical description
- Date or date range
- Owners, occupants, uses
- Timeline of changes
- Key sources and copies
- Preliminary interpretation
- Conflicts and uncertainty
- Unanswered questions
- Researcher and date

Give it a home

Historical society,
library or owner — not
just a laptop.

Share the story

Walking tours,
programs, signage,
classrooms.

Keep it living

Add new photos,
findings and changes
over time.

A COMMUNITY RESOURCE

Inventory tells us what we have. Research helps us understand it.

A growing collection of building records helps a town see the larger picture:

Development patterns

Upper-floor housing

Buildings at risk

Underused spaces

Preservation priorities

Reuse opportunities

Overlooked stories

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WHERE TO LOOK

Start local. Then widen the search.

In your community

- County historical society
- Public library local-history or genealogy room
- County auditor: parcels and owners
- County recorder: deeds and plats
- Village, city or township records
- Longtime businesses, churches, schools and families

Across Ohio

- Ohio History Connection Archives and Library
- Ohio Memory digital library
- Ohio Historic Inventory
- Ohio State Historic Preservation Office
- Heritage Ohio and Ohio Main Street

National tools

- Library of Congress Sanborn maps
- Chronicling America newspapers
- HABS / HAER / HALS
- National Register nominations
- NPS Preservation Brief 35
- National Register Bulletins 15 and 24
- Secretary of the Interior's Standards
- Main Street America

And the best research tool of all: **ask someone.**

KNOW WHEN TO ASK FOR HELP

Some questions need a professional.

National Register eligibility needs evaluation	Historic tax credits are on the table	Federal or state preservation review applies	Major rehabilitation is planned
Significant historic material may be removed	Structural or safety concerns exist	Archaeological resources may be present	The evidence is complex or contradictory



That’s where Revival comes in.

We help small towns move from research to redevelopment: feasibility, funding and historic tax credit strategy, and hands-on guidance for bringing buildings back to life.



Thank you.

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