Repainting Your Historic Property

The L'Enfant Trust
Voluntary Preservation through Conservation Easements.
Washington, D.C.
As part of its mission, The L’Enfant Trust is committed to helping owners of properties protected by its easements maintain the historic integrity of their buildings.

Exterior finishes are a major feature of a building, serving to articulate its architectural elements and convey the relative importance of different spaces within it. Donors frequently ask, “How can I select appropriate colors for repainting the exterior of my historic building?”

The following sections offer helpful guidelines in the paint selection process. They describe when to paint and when not to paint, paint colors appropriate to different eras, the number of paint colors to use, and where to apply them.

As an owner of a building protected by conservation easement, you are required to submit paint color chips to the Trust for approval prior to repainting. Under the terms of the easement, The L’Enfant Trust reserves the right to grant final approval on changes in paint colors or schemes.

### Caring for Historic Exteriors

Wood frame historic buildings must be painted to protect the wood from deterioration caused by fluctuating moisture and temperature. If paint on a wood building is showing signs of failure, it should be repainted to protect its underlying structure.

Unpainted masonry structures, including brick and stone, should not be painted.

If, however, a masonry building is already painted, leaving it painted is often the correct choice particularly if the building has been painted for most of its life. Paint may have been used to protect underlying aging materials or to cover infill materials of a different color. The removal of paint from an historic facade, whether in preparation to repaint or to expose the underlying masonry, should only occur where paint can be easily removed without damaging the underlying surface. A competent painting company familiar with historic facades should be consulted.

Use of high-quality paints and careful preparation of surfaces prior to their application will ensure the long life of an exterior finish.

### Identifying Exterior Areas for Painting

Consider the following exterior areas when selecting a paint color scheme: body, trim, sash and doors, and accent areas. Body color is used on the main sheathing material of the building. Trim color is used on decorative woodwork such as the cornice. Sash and door color is used only on the movable parts of windows and doors. Accent color is sometimes appropriate for unique detailing such as brackets and porch balusters.
**Planning a Paint Color Scheme**

Avoid using too many colors on a structure which can result in visual confusion; aim for three or fewer. Generally, use only one color for the body. If the body of a building features two different sheathing materials, it is possible to use two different body colors to distinguish these exterior areas. Generally, use only one trim color for all decorative woodwork such as gables, exposed structures, cornices, corner boards, and porches. Use a sash and door color which is darker than the trim color to cause these openings in the building to recede. Use a sash and door color lighter than the trim color to cause these openings to project.

**Exterior finishes are a major feature of a building, serving to articulate its architectural elements.**

An accent color may be used for unique detailing which is part of the decorative woodwork such as frieze panels and porch balusters. These features may be painted with a second trim color or the body color. The accent color should be applied consistently to all similar detailing throughout the structure and used with restraint. The body color will dominate the structure. Aim to choose a muted tone for the body color and reserve brighter colors for the trim, sash and door, and accent areas. To avoid highlighting functional elements such as gutters and downspouts paint them with the body color.

**Evidence suggests that prior to the American Revolution, building owners used strong and bright paint colors including reds, oranges, and vivid greens. Following the Revolution, as the young country rejected colonial architecture in favor of Greek Revival style for its association with democratic ideals, a shift from using bright colors to whites occurred. In the years leading to the Civil War, painters mixed paint at or near a job site and created colors from materials available locally. To keep cost and maintenance low, building owners frequently chose a white for the main body color and a dark trim color.**

**Original Historic Paint Colors**

Following the Civil War, companies began manufacturing ready-mixed paint, and it became available wherever the railroad could take it. Popular pattern books for home construction and color paint brochures were widely distributed. Consequently, more building owners were selecting paints from a greater color palette.

Andrew Jackson Downing’s book, Cottage Residences, popularized Romantic-style houses echoing the picturesque movement in landscape and architecture. The houses Downing advocated used colors harmonious in nature: neutrals, stone, and gray, rather than the stark white with green trim scheme.

During the Victorian era, balloon frame construction replaced heavy-timber framing, freeing houses from their traditional box shape. Industrialization allowed various house components to be mass-produced and shipped resulting in extravagant use of complex shapes and elaborate detailing. During this time, paint companies capitalized on a rising interest in and study of color theory. They created palettes and distributed brochures suggesting innovative uses of contrasting colors, generally darker ones, on this multi-faceted architecture.

**Historic Color Suggestions from BENJAMIN MOORE PAINTS™**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Era</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Colonial</th>
<th>Gothic Revival</th>
<th>Italianate</th>
<th>VICTORIAN</th>
<th>Richardsonian Romanesque</th>
<th>20TH CENTURY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Base Color</td>
<td>Trim Color</td>
<td>Door Color</td>
<td>Second Empire</td>
<td>Queen Anne</td>
<td>Romanesque</td>
<td>Colonial Revival</td>
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To view these colors you may visit the BENJAMIN MOORE PAINTS™ website at www.benjaminmoore.com

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Choosing Historic Colors Today

All building owners have color preferences. The L’Enfant Trust can help you find ways to incorporate your tastes into an appropriate color scheme for your building while fulfilling your easement obligation. With the array of paint colors available today, it is easy to find a color that reflects your personal style while still maintaining a connection to the building’s historic past.

Author John Crosby Freeman suggests that historical paint colors work well when they emulate traditional and local building materials and pigments. For example, browns, grays, and reds evoke wood, stone, and brick, respectively. Ochres (orange-yellow) and iron oxide colors (reddish-brown) lend themselves to a huge array of choices.

If your taste demands use of less traditional color, consider a scheme that incorporates that color sparingly, such as on shutters or accent areas. Like too much make-up, an overly intense color or too many colors may mar natural beauty or require costly maintenance.

Remember that the colors you select impact your neighbors, your street, your historic district and your community. Express your tastes but defer to your building’s history. Allow your property to relate its architectural or historical significance through careful selection and application of paint.

Resources


### Identifying Architectural Style

**Era**
- Pre-Civil War
- Victorian
- 20th Century

**Style**
- Colonial
- Gothic Revival
- Italianate
- Second Empire
- Queen Anne
- Richardsonian Romanesque
- Colonial Revival
- Prairie
- Craftsman

**Prominent Features of Style**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Era/Style</th>
<th>Colonial</th>
<th>Gothic Revival</th>
<th>Italianate</th>
<th>Second Empire</th>
<th>Queen Anne</th>
<th>Richardsonian Romanesque</th>
<th>Colonial Revival</th>
<th>Prairie</th>
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**Era PR E-CIVIL WAR**
- Colonial
- Gothic Revival
- Italianate

**Historic Districts: Where to look in Washington**
- Capitol Hill
- LeDroit Park
- Anacostia
- Dupont Circle
- Cleveland Park
- Logan Circle
- Shaw
- Strivers' Section

**20TH CENTURY**
- Colonial Revival
- Prairie
- Craftsman

**Prominent Features of Style**
- Symmetry
- Open and exposed roof eaves and rafters
- Decorative beams or braces under gables
- Raised windows
- Cupola or tower
- Mansard roof
- Slate, wood, or concrete shakes
- Thick masonry walls, stone work
- Accented front door with decorative pediment or friezes
- Risen, centric facade emphasis horizontal surface of building
- Low-pitched roof
- Open and exposed roof eaves and rafters
- Decorative beams or braces under gables

**Identifying Architects**
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