

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE
OFFICE OF PLANNING

DOOR REPLACEMENT FOR HISTORIC PROPERTIES

There are three basic steps for replacing doors on an historic building: 1) identifying the appropriate replacement door for your building, 2) finding a company that manufactures and installs doors, and 3) getting a DC building permit, with approval from the Historic Preservation Office (HPO). The HPO staff can help you with each of these steps, as can a qualified architect or contractor familiar with historic buildings. You should always consult with the HPO *prior* to ordering the door or commencing with the installation.

Considering the difficulty and expense involved in finding a good, appropriate replacement door, always consider repair over replacement. If your original door is beyond repair, the replacement door should replicate the material, style, and dimensions of the original door. If you have a non-original front entry door, it is often instructive to look at other similar houses with original doors. It is likely that your house originally featured the same style door, particularly since so many of Washington's historic buildings were built in groups. There is an astonishing variety of configurations and styles among historic doors. Full glass doors, either single or double-leaf, were frequently used on late 19th and early 20th-century rowhouses and are readily available today. In terms of paneled wood doors, while most of them are acceptable as is, it is not too difficult to add wood molding around the panels to create the look of bolection molding. The common six-panel, or "cross-and-bible" doors, are nearly all replacements with no historic precedent. Avoid "Victorian" style doors with lots of detail and oval etched or decorated glass panels, as they are typically not found in the historic districts.

Exterior door systems have seen tremendous technological breakthroughs in the past 10-15 years. There are four primary categories of new exterior doors: steel, fiberglass, composites, and real wood. The HPO can not approve steel doors on street-fronting elevations. Fiberglass and composite doors may be appropriate, provided they are painted. Solid wood doors are the most appropriate for historic buildings.

When shopping for a new door, pay strict attention to finishing instructions. Many of these new doors require specific stains and finishes to achieve good results. Also, solid wood doors can behave in an unruly fashion if not sealed completely. The humidity in the air can make solid wood doors warp and bow, causing them to fit poorly in the frames. All six faces of the door should be painted – including the back, front, top bottom, and both sides – each time the door is refinished or painted.

Sources for New Wood Doors

House of Doors, 4000 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304. Phone 703-751-9000.
www.houseofdoors.com.

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The Window Warehouse, 4602 Annapolis Road, Bladensburg, MD 20710. Phone 301-779-5283.

Joel Truitt Builders, Inc., 734 7th Street, SE, WDC 20003. Phone 202-547-2707.

The following are phone numbers and websites for the headquarters of some national companies that provide wood doors. Many of these lines are carried by or can be ordered through the larger lumber suppliers, such as Smoot (703-823-2100), TW Perry (301-652-2600), Gallaher & Huguely (202-723-1000), and The J.F. Johnson Lumber Company (301-621-7667 or 301-858-5277); the websites typically provide you with a list of local distributors.

Kolbe & Kolbe Windows and Doors. www.kolbe-kolbe.com.

Pella Windows and Doors. www.pella.com.

Jeld-Wen Windows and Doors. www.jeld-wen.com/exteriordoors.

The Building Permit

Replacing doors in an historic district requires that you obtain a DC building permit. You will need: 1) photographs of the building sufficient to show the building and existing door, and 2) information on the proposed replacement, such as a specification sheet or catalogue provided by the manufacturer, or architectural drawings. With those in hand, contact the HPO at 442-8800 and ask to speak to one of our staff, or come to the office at 801 North Capitol Street, NE in Suite 3000 any weekday between 9:00-5:00. We will provide you with the permit application, or you may download it at www.dcr.dc.gov (click on “permits” and then “building permit application”). Typically, permits can be approved “over-the-counter” and issued within an hour. Once the permit has been issued, you may begin the work.

For more information on the historic preservation review process, please access our website at www.planning.dc.gov/hpo.