

Guidelines

CAPITOL HILL'S UNPAINTED LADIES

American's extensive use of wood for houses—not so surprising in light of an entire continent of trees—has always astonished Europeans accustomed to stone and brick buildings.

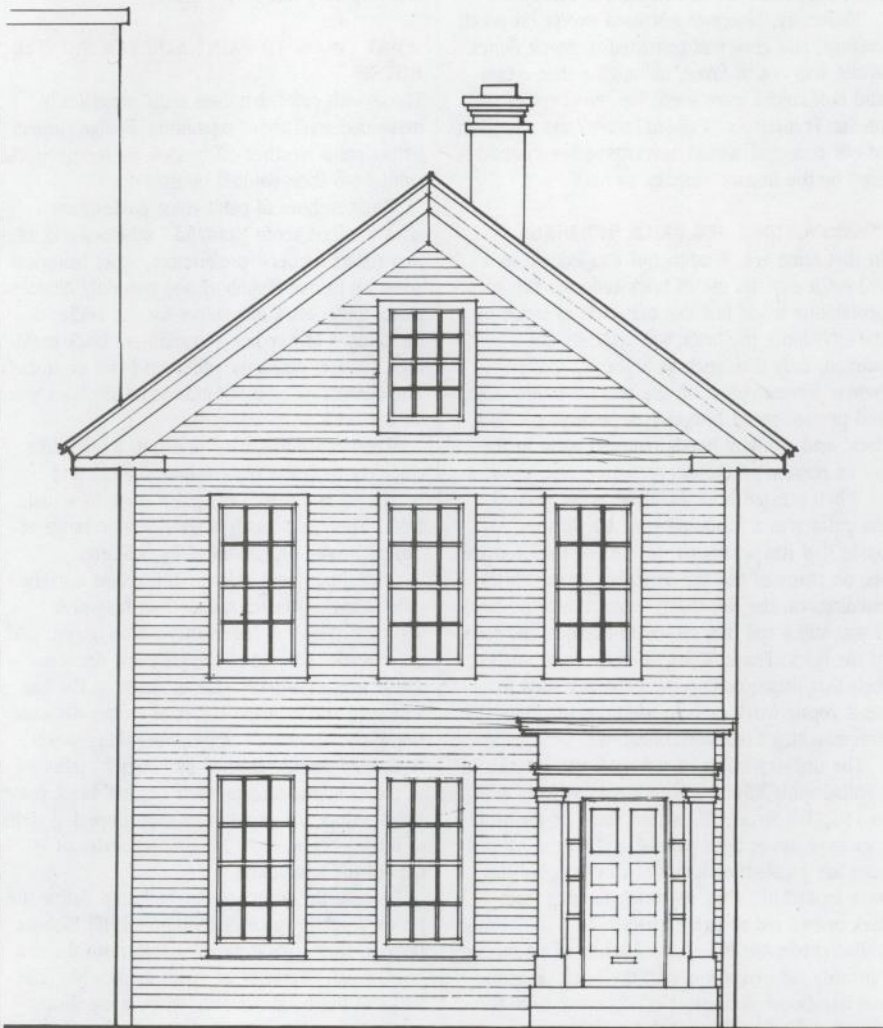
American's wood buildings sometimes required curious architectural adaptations, such as translating stone classical styles to wood siding. Later, entire architectural styles grew out of the celebration of frame construction. The Stick and Shingle styles, cousins to the Queen Anne style, were both wood frame by their very nature. The Stick style was a loosely interpreted, inside-out expression of a wood skeleton; the Shingle style was the antithesis of the Stick style's skeletal expression, relying on a taut exterior membrane of wood shingles for its distinctive character.

Some historians see all of these late 19th century styles as being possible because of the flexibility allowed by the simpler joints of wood platform framing. (The older system of balloon framing used large members that ran from the foundation to the roof and required careful joinery, whereas platform framing entails building a simple first floor platform on the foundation, standing up small dimension wood to the second story, building another platform, and so on using small lumber and simple joints.) In both earlier heavy timber framing and masonry construction corners are difficult to make, therefore expensive. As platform framing supplanted balloon framing, corners were much simpler to build, resulting in the complex and exuberant massing of the late 19th century styles.

LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY PAINT COLOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Wood buildings required painting and paint allowed the use of color. In the early 19th century, during the popularity of classically based Colonial, Federal, and Greek Revival styles, building bodies were almost universally painted white; shutters and trim, green. Charles Dickens commented on this fact during a visit in 1842. Later, Andrew Jackson Downing, a major influence on American residential architecture with publications such as *Cottage Residences* (1842) and *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850),

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THE UBIQUITOUS GREEN AND WHITE COLOR SCHEMES DOWNING RAILED AGAINST IN THE MID-19TH CENTURY ARE APPROPRIATE FOR COLONIAL REVIVAL BUILDING STYLES, INCLUDING THE GREEK REVIVAL SUCH AS THIS.

lamented the ubiquity of green and white schemes.

As tastes in the mid-nineteenth century moved toward the romantic from the classical forms, Downing and others proposed darker and more pigmented color schemes. This movement was seen as being toward the natural away from artifice.

Downing and others advocated schemes based on nature and the materials found in construction: hues related to soil, stone, the bark of

trees, wood. Downing suggested "soft and quiet shades," neutral tints of fawn, drab, gray, brown, etc., avoiding white, yellow, red, blue, black and the like. Perhaps in reaction to the white and green schemes so dominant when he began proposing color schemes, Downing advised avoiding the color green altogether since houses are not built from leaves and grass. Use of green as a paint color could also be counseled against on the practical grounds of the difficulty of harmonizing with foliage colors around the house.

As the century progressed, schemes darkened and became enriched to include maroons, deep

browns and olives. By the late 19th century when most of Capitol Hill was built, rich colors such as ochre, oxblood, rose, beige, olive, terracotta, brown, and eggplant were popular nationally. There is, however, evidence to suggest that color tastes were conservative on Capitol Hill with gray, brown, dark gray, and green common, and even white and yellow occasionally seen on trim. The styles popular in those years (Queen Anne, Richardsonian Romanesque, Shingle, Gothic Revival, etc.) were also characterized by the use of dark colors and polychromy derived from the mixing of various natural materials.

Nationally, blue was not used except on porch ceilings, and gray was restricted to porch floors. White was not in favor, although richer cream and buff colors were used. The vivid colors seen on San Francisco's "Painted Ladies" are a product of our time and would never have been considered by the houses' original owners.

WASHINGTON'S RED BRICK BUILDINGS

In that same era, Washington was known as a red brick city. Its use of brick reflected fire laws prohibiting wood building materials in much of the city. Since the brick was typically not painted, only trim such as brackets, shutters (when present, often on the rear), window sash, and pressed metal components such as cornices, door, and window hoods required paint in the colors popular of the day.

When pressed brick buildings were painted, the paint was a formulation of oil with red iron oxide that has weathered to the powdery red we see on many of the late Victorian pressed brick buildings on the Hill today. Even though a paint, it was still a red that served to enhance the red of the brick. Frank Welsh, historic paint analyst, feels that these coatings were usually used to mask repair work or help additions or other non-matching brickwork blend in.

The unifying effect of red brick can be seen in "Philadelphia Row," fifteen buildings from 128 to 156 11th Street, SE, where many of the buildings have never been painted and all the painted ones are painted brick color. All of Capitol Hill once looked like this: red brick ranging from dark brown-red to rosier shades.

Polychromatic effects were achieved by mixing variously colored stone with the brick. Elegant and handsome decorative effects came from the use of molded brick, corbeled cornices, pressed brick with fine "butter" joints, projecting arches at windows and doors, and the like. These examples of the brick mason's skill are obscured by paint that covers masonry joints and decreases the sense of light and shadow across the projections.

While many Capitol Hill houses have been painted over the years, the need to paint brick buildings is arguable. Buildings are painted more often because of owner preference or fashion than moisture protection. If it is moisture protection, why would the harder pressed brick on the front of a building be painted when the softer

common brick on the rear is not? Or why is one building painted when its identical neighbor is not? Several reliable sources relay that in the early years of the rehabilitation of Capitol Hill, painting a previously unpainted house announced to the world that it had been renovated.

At any rate, the cardinal rule is: Don't paint your historic brick row house if it is currently not painted.

(In some cases, it may be appropriate to use a coat of paint to camouflage badly done or ill-considered variegated or blotchy "used" brick in contemporary masonry work.)

WHAT COLOR TO PAINT ALREADY PAINTED HOUSES

Those with painted houses must periodically make decisions about repainting, benign neglect letting paint weather off houses, or removing the paint from their painted houses.

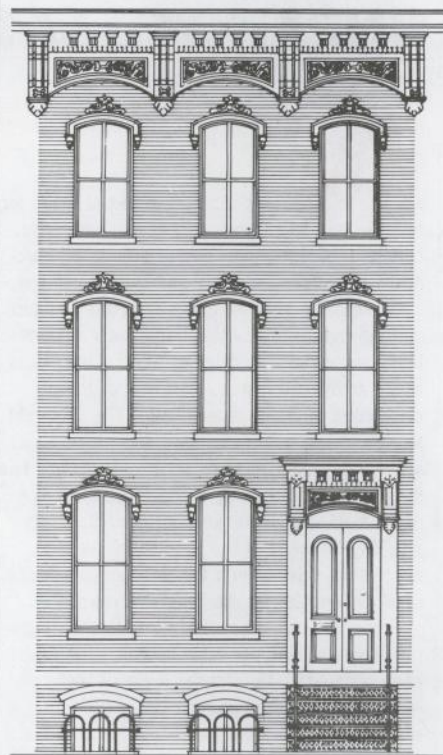
While authors of paint color guides have always talked about "tasteful" schemes and ones that reflect owners' preferences, strict historical accuracy in our neighborhood generally dictates matte finish brick-like colors for the bodies of the facades of our late Victorian-era brick buildings. (Please, no shiny paints on brick or stone!) The current recommendation is to use latex paint on the brick so it will breathe.

When repainting your house in a brick-like color try to find a place where the brick is unpainted and match the paint color to actual brick. There is actually a considerable range of "brick" color on Capitol Hill's buildings.

Over time, paint colors often reflect current (and changing) tastes rather than historical accuracy. This has led to many blue, green, and gray facades painted in the past few decades. These may eventually look as dated as the harvest gold and avocado colors of earlier decades. Doing the historically appropriate thing when repainting already painted buildings by painting in colors approximating their original brick color helps reduce the problem of superimposing styles of other eras on the 19th century styles of Capitol Hill's buildings.

Because the fronts of our buildings define the primary public space of the Capitol Hill Historic District, they should ideally conform to the red brick visual character as much as possible. The backs of the buildings also define a significant public space, but it is space that is already much more substantially altered than the front public space. For that reason, and because small dark row houses get so much of their light from the wells created by doglegs to the rear of the houses, it may be acceptable to paint already painted house backs and walls of the doglegs in light colors to maximize reflected light.

Stone should never be painted. If, however, stone trim or the foundation stone on your building has already been painted, you should follow the same rule for repainting that you follow for repainting already painted brick: use a



CAPITOL HILL'S BRICK ITALIAN STYLE BUILDINGS LIKE THIS ONE SHOULD BE LEFT UNPAINTED OR, IF ALREADY PAINTED, REPAINTED IN A BRICK-LIKE COLOR. THE ELABORATE CORNICE AND HOODS AT DOORS AND WINDOWS ARE INTENDED TO SIMULATE STONE SO SOFT AND NATURAL COLORS ARE APPROPRIATE FOR THESE ELEMENTS. WINDOW SASH MAY STILL FOLLOW THE VICTORIAN ERA PREFERENCE FOR DARK, RECEDING COLORS.

color approximating as closely as possible the original color of the material. In the case of already painted stone this will mean discovering whether the stone is brownstone, pale limestone, or green serpentine, common stones used on the Hill. You can probably see a bit of the stone at a door or window frame or remove a little of the paint to see what the stone type is. Again, use a flat, not gloss, paint.

COLORS FOR EARLIER AND LATER BUILDINGS IN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

Different treatments are needed for Capitol Hill's earlier and later buildings. The occasional Federal and Greek Revival house, if wood, should be painted white or pale cream.

Capitol Hill's wood Italianate building stock, generally dating from slightly earlier than the



THIS TRANSITIONAL BUILDING IS ROMANESQUE IN STYLE ON THE BOTTOM, WITH BEAUX ARTS MOTIFS AT THE TOP STORY. ITS BUILDING MATERIALS, GREEN ROCKFACED STONED, GREY LIMESTONE, DARK RED BROWN PRESSED BRICK WITH CHARCOAL GREY BUTTER JOINTS, AND SLATE MANSARD PLACE IT SQUARELY IN THE LATE VICTORIAN POLYCHROMATIC TRADITION. HISTORIC PAINT ANALYSIS SHOWED THE WINDOW SASH WAS ORIGINALLY A DARK GREEN. THE PRESSED METAL CORNICE WITH SWAG DESIGN IMITATES STONE SO IS PAINTED A STONE-LIKE COLOR.

Romanesque and Queen Anne derived buildings, should generally be painted pale and natural colors. The "soft and quiet" colors suggested by Downing are appropriate, but generally not the richer colors of the late 19th century.

Likewise, the early 20th century houses with buff-colored brick, front porches and mansard roofs with dormers should stay unpainted or, if painted, be repainted in a light hue similar to their original buff or tan. These paler colors reflect the change of style to lighter colored building materials.

Also, there are a few Victorian-era houses built of brown, tan, or variegated brick. If already painted those houses should be painted colors to match their original brick colors.

TRIM COLORS

Once we accept a red brick body color for many of our buildings, late 19th century color sources suggest painting trim a lighter color, often a lighter shade of the dominant house color (rather than introducing another color). Conversely, if the house body is light, they suggest a darker trim color. By the late Victorian era, even this value reversal is not absolute: many buildings were almost uniformly dark.

Looking at the colors of the Sherwin-Williams (a manufacturer who was in business in the late 19th century) paint chips included in the *Century of Color* book referenced at the end of this piece, one can see the softness and harmony of the palette that attracted Downing.

Another recommendation of the period was to make window sash dark so they would recede into the body of the house. Reddish or chocolate brown, dark green, olive, or even black are all colors mentioned. Dark, rich greens on window frames and sash, Downing's prohibition notwithstanding, seem to have been common. The results of several paint analyses have established the original color on such wooden elements as

green. Roger Moss, author of *Century of Color*, says that it was extremely common for Victorians to paint window sash and frame different colors.

Painting window frames and sash white has, at times, been almost a reflex for some homeowners. As we have seen, this is generally inappropriate for Victorian era buildings although some of Capitol Hill's windows reflected its conservatism and were painted unfashionable white. Victorians preferred dark colors for frames and sash. Color is yet another reason why vinyl and aluminum replacement windows, almost always white, are inappropriate. Capitol Hill does, however, have a few examples of Georgian and Federal buildings, and a few examples of 20th century Georgian Revival houses. These houses should appropriately be red brick with white trim, window frames, and sash.

While the emphasis in period paint color recommendations has always been on free-standing houses, Sherwin-Williams, in an 1884 plate showing two commercial row buildings, recommended that all ironwork (cresting, railings, and brackets of balconies) be painted dark colors such as black, bronze green, or vandyke brown. Other general guidance included the recommendation to use darker colors low on the building and lighter colors higher up to avoid a top-heavy appearance. Writers of the 19th century also recommended that projecting parts of the building, which they called high lights, should be lighter than the receding parts of the building, which they called shadows. (These high lights and shadows are precisely the effect achieved by brick masons in embellishing our brick facades with texture from corbeling and molded brickwork.)

Although corner boards, cornices, water tables, and belt courses were painted a trim color on frame buildings, these elements on Capitol Hill's masonry houses should be the same color as the body of the house.

Some of the lively San Francisco and Cape May paint jobs "pick out" various elements in contrasting colors. Early writers did not emphasize this practice, preferring trim elements to show up in terms of light and shadow. Only in cases where trim details might not show up clearly under natural light or when brackets were fabricated from three or more boards with a recessed side or scroll on the side would they recommend picking out. In that case, the recessed area would have been picked out in the body or main building color. Various historical and contemporary sources warn against excessive picking out as it can lead to too much emphasis on parts rather than the whole. While we may want our buildings to express our individuality, we still want to be fair to their historical nature.

General advice whenever selecting colors for elements on your house or building is to work with the colors of the materials already on the building. If it has cool gray slate (that is slate with a bluish cast) on the mansard, any other grays you pick for paint colors should also be

cool, not warm, hues. Otherwise, your warm gray may appear muddy. Remember, the late Victorian-era buildings of Capitol Hill often incorporated quite a lot of color in their materials, including green stone on foundations, red brick, putty colored limestone, colorful stained glass and the like. It is best to begin any color scheme with the colors of the building, harmonizing with them rather than introducing a new palette.

Paint for wood and pressed metal trim elements should generally be semi-gloss or gloss oil base. Because the cost of the paint material is a relatively small part of the expense of an entire paint job, it makes sense to buy a premium paint for all exterior painting work. If a premium paint lasts ten years instead of eight, the extra original expense is more than justified.

WOOD HOUSES AND PORCHES

While many Capitol Hill buildings have little paintable trim, the wood frame and sided buildings, with or without wood porches, represent a significant exception. The other major category of paint opportunity is the wood porches found even on brick buildings.

Capitol Hill's wood-sided frame buildings, other than the occasional Greek Revival or Federal building, are generally of the period slightly earlier than the dominant brick building stock, frequently of an Italianate character. As such, they should use the soft colors of the Downing palette. Roger Moss' book, *Century of Color* is helpful with suggestions for these wood buildings where more decisions than just trim color have to be made.

The Hill's wood porches should take their color cues from the style of the building they are on, whether it is Greek Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne, Romanesque, or a 20th century revival.

Perhaps the most common porch type on the Hill is the porch on the house type identified as the "S" type: the often tan or red Flemish bond brick houses with mansard roofs and porches. These houses were built during one of the resurgences of the popularity of the Georgian style and often have classical touches on the porches, like capitals on round columns. White is the appropriate color for these porches and for the trim on these houses.

PAINT ANALYSIS: ADDITIONAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

In some cases, you may be curious about original colors on trim, window sash, or other elements. If so, you can have a paint analysis done by a historic paint analyst who can identify the original color on an element using a standardized color identification system (the Munsell color system) independent of paint colors or other proprietary systems. Frank Welsh, one of the pioneers in the field, does paint analysis and wrote a publication called the *Paintpamphlet* to guide homeowners interested in investigating original colors on various elements of their houses. Welsh, and other paint analysts, use high-powered microscopes to determine the number of layers of coatings, types (whether oil-base paints, varnish, etc.), original color, gloss, texture, graining, marbling, stenciling, and approximate age of coatings. To provide a historic paint analyst with enough of a sample to work from you must generally be able to provide a piece of historic building fabric, a section of molding, a piece of trim or the like. The *Paintpamphlet* referenced at the end of this piece gives complete instructions for sampling, shipping, and the like.

A lower tech (and correspondingly less accurate) way to investigate original paint colors is to sandpaper a "crater" on whatever element you are investigating. Each layer of paint on the element will be revealed on the sides of the crater. Be advised, though, that the old colors may have changed with the years or the layers may be too thin to provide useful information. In either case, whether your paint analysis is do-it-yourself or professional, you should select samples for testing from protected locations where the paint has weathered less. Under window sills or the bottom edge of clapboards are good locations.

PAINT REMOVAL

Generally, good maintenance with regular repainting before the paint surface has suffered from advanced deterioration is preferable to paint removal. However, in cases of neglect when paint has cracked and lifted there may be no alternative to removal.

Be advised that old wood, stone, and brick

can be very fragile so you should use the gentlest means possible. Naturally, this totally precludes sandblasting (except in some cases for cast iron). Sandblasting is not only extremely destructive to wood, brick and mortar, but is also prohibited by law in the Historic District.

Basically, paint removal choices are chemical, heat, mechanical or combinations. Each method has advantages and disadvantages that you should investigate thoroughly before proceeding or signing a contract to have the work done. Be sure to use a reputable professional for any major paint removal project, get references for other Capitol Hill projects, and visit the jobs. Scrutinize the overall job (many recent brick paint removal jobs on the Hill have left quite a lot of light colored paint adhering to the dark brick), and look closely at the brick, mortar, and wood to see that they have not been damaged.

The National Park Service recommends a line of paint removal and cleaning products by a company called ProSoCo. Be sure to avoid strong acidic washes that can result in the same damage as sandblasting.

Finally, do test patches in inconspicuous locations testing compatibility of whatever products you propose to use with the actual building materials and paints on your house. Give the test patches as long as possible to dry out and weather before proceeding with the complete job. Sometimes staining or deterioration takes weeks or even months to appear. If at all possible, it is best to do test patches a full year before you plan to do the actual work so that the patch can weather through a complete cycle of seasons.

A cautionary note about all paint removal on Capitol Hill's historic buildings: virtually all paints made prior to 1970 had lead in them. Removal of these lead containing paints, especially by sanding and burning puts lead into the environment and potentially into the lungs and blood of those doing the removing. If you are going to remove paint yourself, make sure you know all the safety precautions you should take to protect you and especially your children from the toxic effects of lead. While the toxic effects of lead-based paint particles are damaging to adults, they can cause severe permanent damage to the health of young children. ♦

FURTHER READING

Century of Color: Exterior Decoration for American Buildings 1820-1920, by Roger Moss pub. by the American Life Foundation, 1981. (Available at the National Trust for Historic Preservation Bookstore at Decatur House on Lafayette Square.) This book is an excellent source of information. It includes both a general discussion of color attitudes and also numerous color plates illustrating actual color schemes. Most of the schemes are for free standing frame houses.

In addition to the Sherwin-Williams colors in *Century of Color*, Fuller O'Brien has *The Palette of Cape May, Victorian Colors* with some brighter colors than Sherwin-Williams' Heritage Colors. Pratt and Lambert has *Early American Colours* appropriate for pre-1880s buildings.

The Preservation Briefs (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Preservation Assistance Division, Technical Preservation Services) available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402 are good sources of information:

Mack, Robert C. *The Cleaning and Waterproof Coating of Masonry Buildings*. Preservation Briefs #1.

Grimmer, Anne E. *Dangers of Abrasive Cleaning to Historic Buildings*. Preservation Briefs #6.

Kay D. Weeks and David W. Look, *Exterior Paint Problems on Historic Woodwork*. Preservation Briefs #10.

Paintpamphlet by Frank S. Welsh has both general background about historic paints and about paint analysis. It is available for a small charge from: Frank S. Welsh, Historic Paint Color Consultant, 859 Lancaster Avenue, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, 19010, (215) 525-3564.

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practices of the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Office and with the Standards of the Secretary of the Department of the Interior.

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