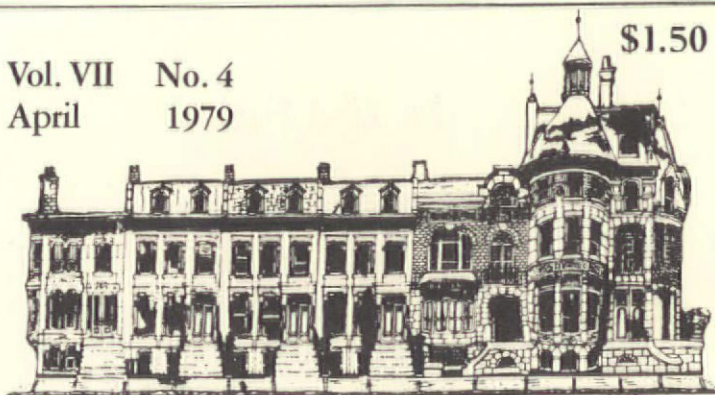


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Restoration And Maintenance Techniques For The Antique House

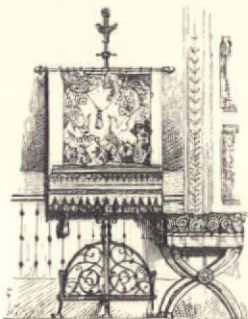
The Interpretive Restoration

By Clem Labine

A subtitle for this article could be: "Don't Feel Imprisoned By Mediocre Taste." Old-house owners who feel a responsibility about the historical character of their homes often worry greatly about whether what they are doing with the house is a true representation of the "original." They feel guilty if what they are doing is not an historically accurate duplication of what the original owners did.

THIS ARTICLE IS DESIGNED to eliminate needless guilt and anxiety. Granted, an old house entails special obligations: Everything you do to the house should be in keeping with the spirit and tradition of that particular style. To thine own house be true. But the search for historical authenticity can be carried to extremes that make the house a burden rather than a joy.

SOME PEOPLE will make changes from the original—and then feel guilty about it. Others will slavishly reproduce some of the original decorative treatments—even though they personally don't like it. The objective of this article is to help you distinguish between important and unimportant changes. Worry about the important ones—and have fun in the areas that allow you some creative freedom.



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Coming Next Month

COOLING THE NATURAL WAY

I AM ASSUMING in this discussion that your old house is like mine; i.e., it is not an historically important home. It wasn't designed by a famous architect; nobody famous ever lived there; nothing important ever happened there; and it is not a particularly exquisite example of any particular architectural style. In other words, it is an "ordinary" old house.

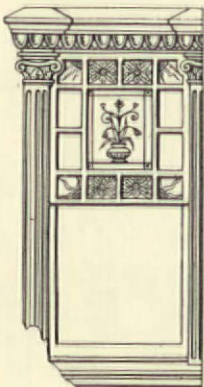
IN SOME WAYS, it is harder to restore the "ordinary" house than the historically important one. With the historical house, your course is clear: You want to make it as close to the historical original as possible. But with the "ordinary" old house there is less precedent to guide you.

THE FIRST STEP in restoring an "ordinary" old house is to make a distinction between reversible and irreversible changes.

Reversible Work

WE START WITH the premise that an old house is a cultural trust. Any house that has survived for 60 years or more in our throw-away culture has a special claim on our sympathy and attention.

FURTHER, we have no moral right to destroy good craftsmanship of past
(Continued on page 42)



Notes From The Readers...

Old-House Plunder:

Thefts Of Art Glass Windows

To The Editor:

UNFORTUNATELY, the success of the old-house movement across the country seems to be having one bad side effect. The growing demand for architectural antiques has created a thriving thieves' market. It is becoming more and more profitable to steal not only the contents of old homes, but parts of the old homes themselves!

ART GLASS WINDOWS seem to be particularly attractive to thieves now—especially those that can be reached from the outside. For example, some neighbors of mine spent nine months working on an 1888 Queen Anne house and were just about to move in...when thieves stole the semi-circular sunburst leaded glass window from the stair landing. The thieves had gotten at it by leaning a short ladder against the outside of the house.

THE POLICE haven't offered much encouragement about recovering the window. They said that this is a growing problem, and that art glass is so popular now that stolen pieces are usually sent out of the city or even out of state for eventual re-sale.

THESE FEW GUIDELINES were offered by the police to lessen the likelihood of your windows getting ripped off. First, make sure you have a photo of each window to aid in identification should the window be stolen. Marks on the glass or on the frame are less effective because the expert thief will quickly detect these marks and obliterate them.

NEXT, if an art glass window can be reached from the outside, make it as difficult as possible for a thief to remove it. A metal grate or bars could be installed. Welding hinge pins and/or nailing the sash to the frames may also work. The windows can also be protected with a securely fastened frame containing a sheet of Lexan. This break-resistant material also has the advantage of protecting the glass from rocks thrown by vandals.

IF YOU ARE REALLY WORRIED about a particularly valuable window that faces the outside, the safest thing to do is to remove it from the frame and mount it somewhere inside the house.

THIS GROWING PRACTICE of plundering old houses puts a special obligation on each of us when we are shopping for architectural antiques. If we buy from dealers who "ask no questions," we are only encouraging this illicit trade and making the thieves bolder

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and bolder. Next time, it could be my house that gets ripped off...or yours!

Emily Williams
Chicago, Ill.

Repairing Cast Iron Waste Pipes

To The Editor:

JACK WOOLAMS' method for repairing cast iron waste pipes (OHJ, Sept. 1978) obviously works well for him. However, experience gained on renovation of six old houses leads me to offer some other suggestions.

(1) Using a sabre saw to cut cast iron piping will take all day—and is unsafe. If the blade catches and breaks, it can fly back at your eyes like a bullet. A hack saw is safer, but will take forever. Solution: Ask your local hardware man if you can borrow his chain type cutter for cast iron. It's then just a 15-min. job—and safe, too.

(2) Even the smallest hardware store can supply you with a Calder coupling. This is basically a rubber sleeve with stainless steel hose clamps to seal the joint watertight. With these, you can remove a defective section of pipe and splice in a new one. Bushings are available to change from cast iron to ABS plastic pipe where codes permit. This is a far more permanent repair than an epoxy patch.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS and you can't get enough working room to install a new section with Calder couplings, then by all means use the epoxy patching system.

ONE LAST HINT: If you have a knowledgeable local hardware man, cultivate him carefully. (Ones that know anything are getting to be a rare breed.) He can be a source of endless information if you ask graciously.

Thelma Smith
Oakland, Calif.

Building A Picket Fence



By Frederick Herman, AIA

A PICKET FENCE CONSISTS basically of three elements: (1) posts, (2) rails, and (3) pickets.

FOR A VERY GENERALIZED DISCUSSION of these elements, let us assume the simplest of picket fences similar to the sketch shown. It should be borne in mind, however, that most picket fences are far more ornate, with late Victorian fencing being a riot of fancy curves, cut outs, scrolls and other decorative elements--gingerbread gone wild.

Posts

THESE ARE THE BASIC vertical supports for any type of fence. In a picket fence, two types can be distinguished: (1) Corner and gate posts (2) Intermediate posts. Corner and gate posts are usually larger (6 in. x 6 in. square) and slightly higher than the intermediate (approx. 4 in. x 4 in. square) posts. In height (distance above ground) they usually range from 2 ft. 6 in. for a low picket fence to 4 ft. 6 in. for a tall one, most falling between these dimensions. Depending on the layout of your fence, the posts are usually set 6 to 8 ft. apart with an allowance of 3 ft. for gates.

Treating The Posts

THE POSTS ARE CRITICAL in your fence as they are the elements that give the fence its stability. They are also the element set in the ground and thus most exposed to the attack of insects and the weather.

EVEN THE BEST untreated wood posts containing mainly heartwood have a limited life. Osage orange has a life span of 25 to 30 years, red cedar and locust 15 to 25 years, white oak and cypress 5 to 10 years. Pine, red oak and poplar have only 2 to 7 years, while untreated sapwood will usually rot out in 1 to 3 years.

IT IS ALSO INADVISABLE to set untreated posts in concrete as they may shrink away from the concrete allowing moisture to enter. Your best bet is to buy commercially pressure-treated posts which have a life span of at least 10 and probably 20 to 30 years depending on the preservative used and the method of application. Posts can be treated at home by

soaking them in preservatives (brushing a preservative on does not provide enough absorption) but care should be used as the chemicals can be toxic and harmful to skin, eyes, etc.

THE LENGTH OF THE POST should be about 2 ft. longer than the ultimate height to allow it to extend about 2 feet into the ground.

Rails

THESE ARE THE HORIZONTAL ELEMENTS stretching from post to post and should be a 2x4. Rails should be supported at least every 8 feet by a post. It is a good idea to use treated lumber and to paint the rails where they join after cutting and fitting but before putting them into place.

THE TYPE OF JOINT between rail and post depends on the design of your fence. The simplest is to simply nail them against the post letting rail (lap) run either in front or to the rear of the post. If you run the rail between the posts you can go from simple toe nailing to fancier grooved or even mortised joints. The top rail should be about 8 inches below the top of the post and the bottom about 9 inches above grade in a 3-ft. high fence.

Pickets

PICKETS ARE THE vertical elements between the posts which are fastened to the rails. They can range in dimension from slender 1-1/4 x 1-1/4 members to being 3 in. x 1-1/4 inch boards with all sorts of ends from being cut at a 45° angle to fancy arrow head design (see sketch). The bottom of the picket should clear the ground by about 3 in. The picket should have a clear space between them of approximately 2 to 3 in. depending on the width of the picket. Usually broad pickets will be closer together (2-2-1/2 in.) than narrow pickets which will have a clear space of 3 in. and even 4 in. between them.

Erecting Your Fence

THE CARDINAL RULES before you start are:

- a) Be sure you are on your property.
- b) Check the local zoning ordinance and building code as to any restrictions which may exist.
- c) Check your deed for any deed restrictions.

THE NEXT STEP IS to lay out the location of your corner and gate posts and to then divide the distance between them into equal segments of between 6 and 8 ft. There is nothing more disconcerting than seeing a fence where the distance between posts expands and contracts like an accordion. It is also advisable to have your fence follow straight lines or a definite curve. Avoid weaving back and forth.

THE NEXT TASK is to set your posts. This entails digging holes and the best bet for this is to use either a post-hole digger or an auger (hand or machine turned). As a rough guide, dig a hole about 6 in. bigger in diameter than your post (i.e., a 12 in. wide hole

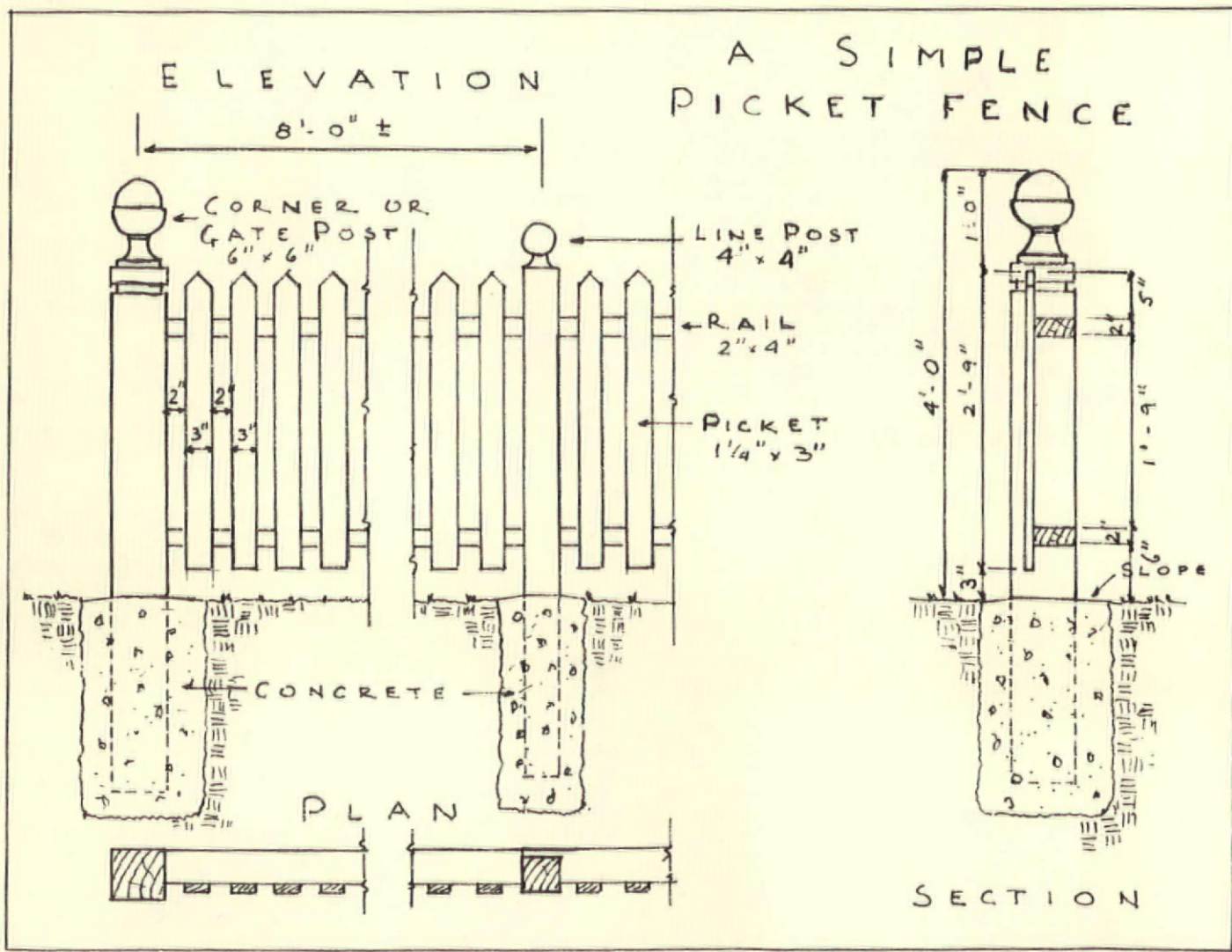
for a 6-in. post) and make it a few inches deeper than the length of the pole to be buried.

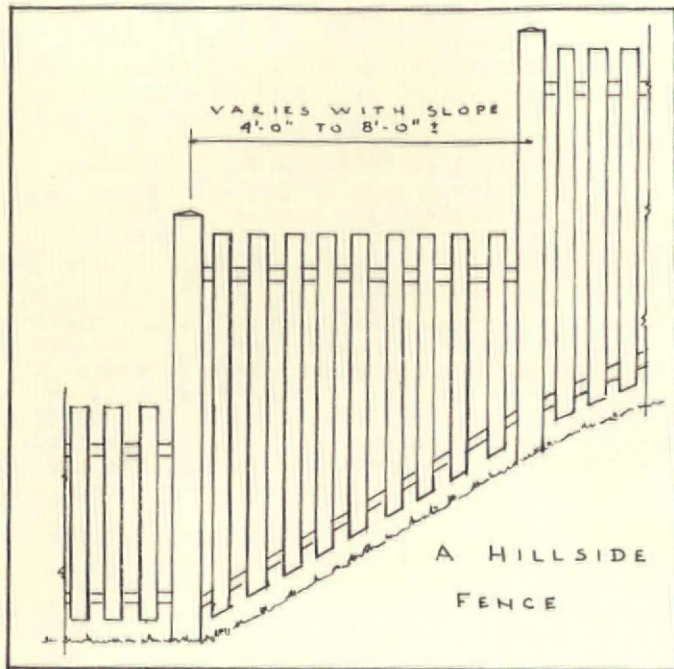
Setting Posts

YOU NOW SET YOUR POST. For a permanent and strong installation, set it in concrete. You can mix your own by buying ready-mix concrete available in approximately 50 lb. bags. Usually, if you are doing this by yourself, you will be setting a post at a time and will only need a little concrete at a time. The ready-mix bag is ideal. Having a concrete truck with 4 cubic yards of concrete standing by is really not practical and very costly. And unless you have a crew to set the poles in pre-dug holes, wasteful.

THERE ARE SEVERAL POINTS to watch in setting posts. First, make sure they are plumb; second, if they are square, make sure that they are not angled or twisted in relation to the other posts. Third, make sure that they extend the proper height above the ground.

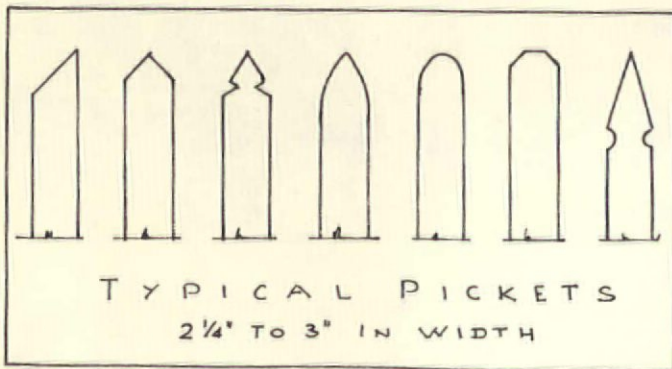
REMEMBER that no terrain is dead level. Your eye cannot see a drop of an inch or two in





8 ft. of lawn, but you sure can see it along the top of a fence. Set your posts so that the tops are level with each other. In cases of uneven terrain, have a definite step down at the appropriate spot (see sketch). Lastly, remember that concrete is plastic and that you will have to provide some arrangement to keep the post in place until the concrete sets. You can use a very dry mix concrete which will minimize the need for such supports. It is also recommended that you slope the concrete slightly away from the post to the ground to avoid creating a trap for water around the post (see sketch).

ONCE YOUR POSTS are set you have about 75 percent of the battle won. It is now a question of cutting and fitting the rails (remember to paint both ends and sides after cutting and fitting and before fastening into place). It is recommended that you use aluminum or at least galvanized nails in all assembly. Ordinary nails will rust and, even when painted over, will eventually create rust stains on your fence.



Paint

THE TRADITIONAL COLOR associated with fences is white. White makes the fence more visible at night, generally makes for a neater appearance and provides a neutral color which goes well with virtually every type of flower and plant material. Colored fences are at times used for special effects in contemporary garden design and for certain attention-getting purposes related to advertising. Some utilitarian fencing such as snow fencing does come pre-painted.

PAINTING IS YOUR BIGGEST maintenance problem with a fence. Paint is also the first line of defense against such things as moisture, fungus and insects which hasten deterioration of wood. Here the best is cheapest. It is advisable to paint your fence, preferably before you assemble it so you can reach all surfaces, especially where they join, with one coat of base paint followed by two coats of outdoor paint. Miscellaneous marks such as hammer dents, nail holes, etc., can be filled in and touched up after the final erection.

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF GOOD outdoor paints and opaque stains available. Oil based paints and top-of-the-line casein paints are among the most popular and long lasting coatings. It is a good idea to check with a reputable local paint dealer to find what is best suited for your particular climate.

ONCE YOUR FENCE IS UP, you have to be aware that it will require ongoing maintenance. The best time for this is every spring after the fence has undergone the hardships of the winter.

Design

THERE IS PROBABLY no such thing as a "typical" picket fence. What is usually associated with that term are the picket fences of the small New England towns.

IN VERY GENERAL TERMS, Colonial picket fences were of a light and open design. In the early 19th century the pickets became heavier and by the late Victorian era they reached the appearance of broad, fancily cut-out boards.

AS DISCUSSED in the first two articles on fences, the design you come up with will depend on your own resources and the results of your research. Your fence can be either the simple picket described here or one which is far more fanciful--depending on what the style of your house calls for and your willingness to put the effort into this most important aspect of your house. ^u

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(Interpretive Restoration--Cont'd from pg.37)

generations. Creations of the past belong as much to the dead and to the generations yet to come as they do to us. We can tear down and meddle all we want with our own constructions. But good work on which previous generations have lavished their time and treasure we have no right to destroy. We have a responsibility to future generations to pass along today's old houses intact.

IN DEFINING "intact," however, we must make a distinction between the decorative appearance of a house and the fabric of a house. We should always be very hesitant to destroy or change the original fabric of a house. But there are many ways that we can alter the appearance of the house--in ways that suit our own tastes--that still remain faithful to the spirit and character of the structure.

THIS DISTINCTION is based on what may be REVERSIBLE at a later date. Should someone come along after you (or if you should change your mind at a later date) and wish to restore the exact original appearance of the house, the work you have done should be easily undone; i.e., be easily reversible.

A SIMPLE EXAMPLE of reversible work is paint and wallpaper. Changing a paint color is easily reversible by merely adding another color on top. And wallpaper can be easily stripped off when a different wall treatment is desired.

THE ONLY TIME a painting operation becomes partially irreversible is when all paint layers are stripped off, thereby eliminating the historic record of the changes in finishes that were laid down since the house was built. When it is necessary to strip paint in a museum house, they avoid this obliteration problem by always leaving small sections unstripped in unobtrusive places. Thus a complete record is intact, should it ever be necessary to trace the entire paint history.

EVEN SOMETHING AS DRASTIC as adding aluminum siding over old clapboards can be considered reversible (even though we don't recommend it). The original material of the house still exists under the new siding. The thousands of people around the country who are ripping off 1940's asbestos and asphalt siding from old houses testify to the reversibility.

HOWEVER, if the contractor (as they often do) removes some of the wooden trim from the exterior then the job becomes less reversible. The only way to re-create the original appearance of the exterior would be to find a pattern and duplicate the original trim--often an impossible task. Once the ornamental woodwork is gone, it's doubtful that the house will ever again regain that architectural feature.

LIKewise, putting in a sheetrock partition is usually reversible--if it is carefully done so that not much of the original fabric is destroyed. But tearing down an ornamental plaster ceiling to replace it with sheetrock is irreversible.



A dining room wall that exemplifies the finest decoration in the American style

at the end of the 18th century with fine woodwork details by Samuel McIntyre.

The Interpretive Restoration

THE DISTINCTION between reversible and irreversible work makes it easier to see where we can express our individual tastes in restoring our particular old house. Many aspects of the decoration--both interior and exterior--involve reversible work. And it is in this area that we can express our own taste without the slightest twinge of guilt. As long as you aren't damaging the fabric of the house, indulge yourself.

A CONCEPT that you may find useful is the "interpretive restoration." An interpretive restoration is one that is in the style of the period, without necessarily being a faithful duplication of what may have been in the house originally.

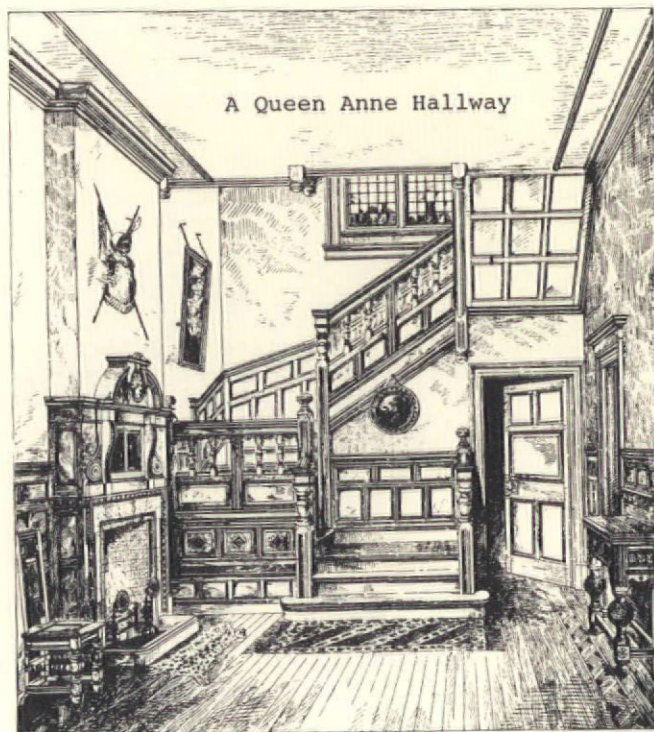
EVEN IN HOUSE MUSEUMS where the original structure is intact, a curator may have to resort to an interpretive restoration for one or more of the rooms. If there isn't enough documentation of the original decoration and furnishings, then the curator has to start making educated guesses based on whatever fragmentary evidence is available combined with knowledge of the styles of the period.

OBVIOUSLY, if your house had some exquisite decorative feature, such as painted stencil-work or scenic wall or ceiling paintings, it is very desirable to preserve or restore these details to the fullest possible extent. But many old houses never had such fine finishes inside. And that's where the interpretive restoration comes in.

For Your House

HERE ARE SOME OF THE CASES in which an interpretive approach may be most practical:

- ▶ You have no idea what the original interior looked like, but you would like to decorate in the style of the period. The house itself provides little physical evidence, and there are no photos or written evidence that you can locate.
- ▶ You have some idea of what the interior looked like (from physical or photographic evidence) but you find that your personal taste is at considerable variance from what a faithful historical restoration would dictate. In effect, you would be spending a lot of time and money to re-create an interior that you didn't like.
- ▶ You have some evidence of what the interior should look like, but you simply don't have the budget to re-create all that would be required. This is not uncommon when people buy large, run-down 19th century houses that had been mansions when originally built. In this case, you might choose to do a low-budget interpretive restoration...keeping your options open in case you come into more money at a later date.



A Queen Anne Hallway

THE BASIC APPROACH to the interpretive restoration is to steep yourself in the social and decorative arts history of the period that relates to your house. Visit house museums of a similar period. Read every book you can get your hands on. Talk to people at your local historical society. And, of course, keep reading *The Old-House Journal*. Read...research...and read some more.

Keep A Focus

THE TIME FRAME you select for your interpretive restoration might have a latitude of 10-20 years. The most important factor is not which time frame you pick, but rather that you stay faithful to the spirit of whichever time frame you select. This gives the end result a unity and clarity of concept that makes it look "designed" rather than just thrown together. Old is not enough; the idea is to put the house together with a coherent theme.

ALSO, BY SELECTING a time frame that is within 10 to 20 years of the house's construction, you'll have decorative details that accent and harmonize with the architectural elements of the house, rather than clashing with them.

SELECTING A TIME FRAME of 10-20 years gives you plenty of latitude to find decorative schemes that please you. Within every period there were movements and counter-movements...the elaborate and the simple...so that you can find models to suit your taste. For instance, Art Nouveau is a style that reached its zenith in 1890-1905, but could fit right in with a Queen Anne/Eastlake house built in 1880 because the Art Nouveau designs were just an extension of the Aesthetic Movement designs that were used initially in Queen Anne homes.

FOCUSING ON A SINGLE ERA actually makes decorating less confusing, because it automatically enables you to eliminate many choices from consideration. If you have a Colonial Revival house with Georgian details, you know that you want Williamsburg-type English reproductions and antiques. So if you see a Tiffany-style lamp shade for sale, no matter how lovely, you can pass it by without a qualm because you know it isn't relevant for what you are doing.

IF THERE IS A SUBSTANTIAL budget for the project, it could be worthwhile to engage a restoration architect or interior designer who has knowledge of the period of interest to you. A competent professional will have more knowledge than you can ever hope to acquire in spare-time study. Even if you use a professional, however, you still want to learn as much as you can yourself before ever talking to the pro.

THE MORE YOU AS CLIENT KNOW, the better able you are to talk intelligently with the professional and get the most out of him or her. Besides, the process of self-education in the design idiom of past periods is one of the most enjoyable parts of restoring your old house.

Interpretive Trade-Offs

BUDGETS OR PRACTICAL considerations often dictate that not every detail from a particular decorative style can be duplicated. For example, many moderately furnished parlors had elaborate draperies that gave a rich feel to the room. Because of the cost of these heavy fabrics today--and the extraordinary upkeep required--a homeowner may wish to keep the window treatments simple or non-existent. But elaboration that is lost at the windows can be added elsewhere. For example, a rich wallpaper pattern or stenciled treatment of the ceiling can be used, which would keep the luxurious feeling.

OFTEN BUILDERS would erect houses with woodwork and plasterwork in the most "modern" designs because the latest pattern books had made their way into the hands of the architect or contractor. However, especially in the Western parts of the U.S., the interior decorating ideas lagged behind the construction styles. Thus in 1885 you might see a homeowner decorating an Eastlake-style house with mid-Victorian cabbage roses. Today, the owner of that house could choose to make interpretive stylistic corrections and decorate with William Morris papers.

EARLY AMERICAN WALLPAPERS, readily available today, are another interesting example of interpretive restoration. These papers are sold as "documentary" papers, but often the original document is not a wallpaper. Rather the patterns are frequently taken from fabrics, book endpapers, china, etc. But this is no reason for the owner of an 1830 Greek Revival house not to use an appropriate paper--even though the house in 1830 probably only had painted walls. Before 1840, the only wallpapers available in the U.S. were expensive materials imported from England, France and elsewhere. Therefore, all but the most luxuri-



Mid-19th century drawing room in the Gothic style.

ous houses went without paper. However, one of the "interpretive" papers can be an appropriate, practical and inexpensive way to capture the flavor of the era.

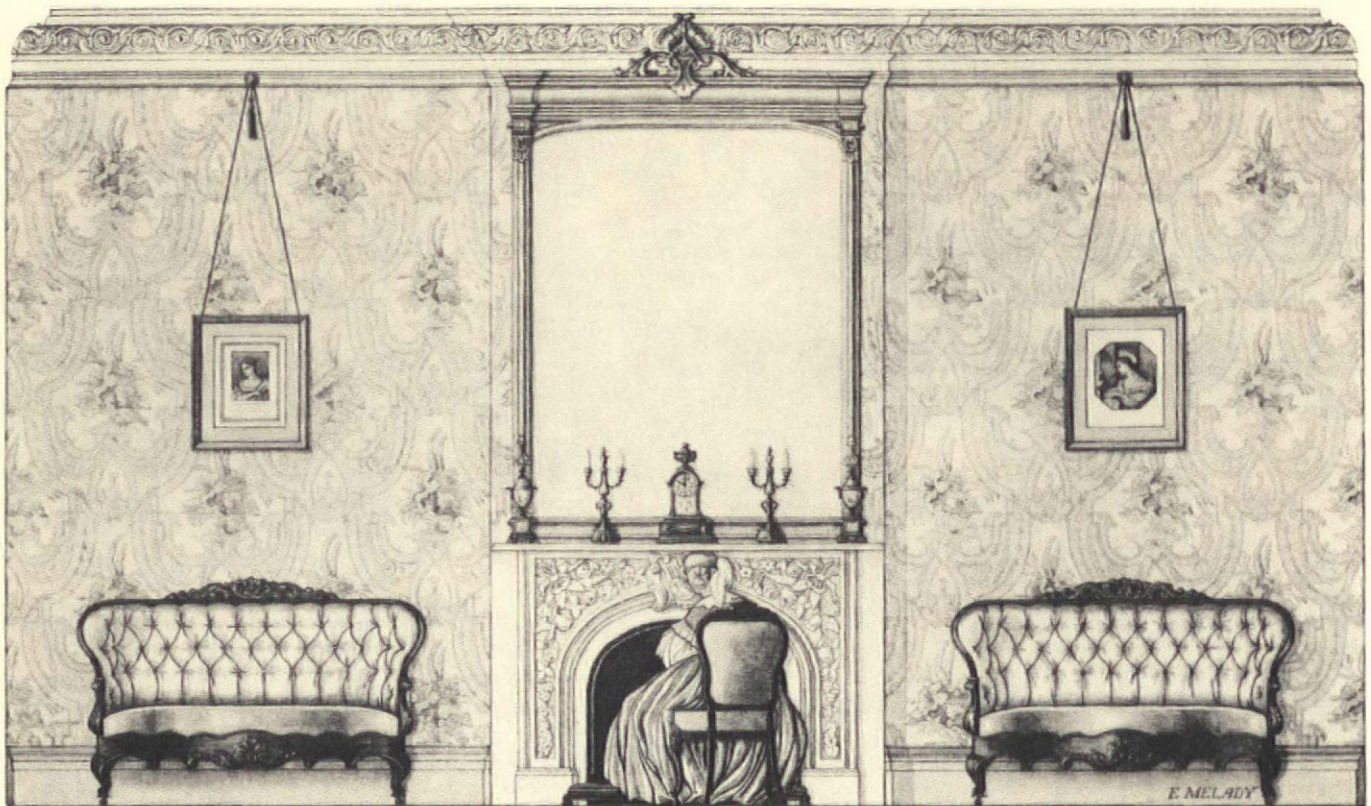
ANOTHER CONSIDERATION: Many late 19th century homes (except those of the very wealthy) were not decorated with the latest fashions...simply because the owners did not have access to the fancy stores of New York and Philadelphia. Rather, these homes were often furnished out of the catalogs of the day. But there's no reason why today's owner of a Colorado Queen Anne house can't play "what if..." and proceed as though the original owners had access to the best stores and taste of the era.

SOME CRITICS of interpretive restorations say that it is "gilding the lily" to put in period effects that were not present in the original. And of course it can be overdone. One would not want to install an elegant Georgian interior in a simple Colonial farmhouse, nor a Rococo Renaissance Revival interior in a 19th century workman's cottage. But that's where the "What if..." part of the exercise comes in. If the best design minds of the period had been used on your house, they wouldn't have overdone it either. They might have developed a richer-looking interior than your house originally had...but it would have been very much in keeping with the style and proportions of the house.


Guidelines

IN PUTTING TOGETHER your interpretive restoration, here are a few guidelines to keep in mind:

1. Your work should not involve permanent changes in any of the original architectural features of the house.
2. The interpretive work should involve primarily the decorative features, i.e.; color schemes, wall treatments, ceiling treatments, furniture and accessories, and the like.

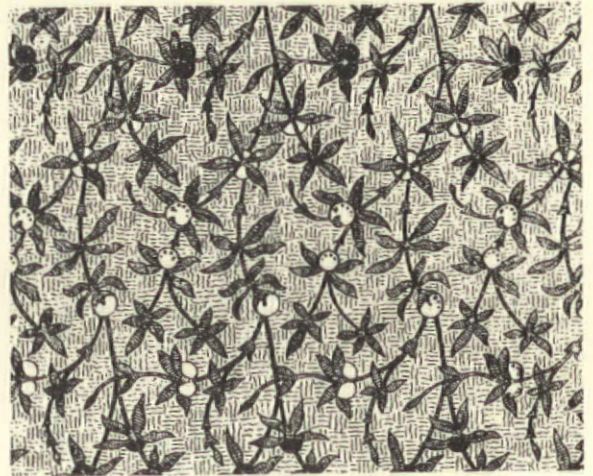


A mid-Victorian parlor in New York City, circa 1858.

3. You should focus on one decorative period-- usually the period right around the time the house was built. This will give your design a coherent vision that sets it apart from the countless "eclectic" renovations.
4. Your work should be in harmony with the original design idea of the house. A Colonial saltbox would have a rustic Early American interior; A Greek Revival would have a classically oriented interior; A Queen Anne an Aesthetic Movement interior A classic American Farmhouse would be based on the "Catalog Style;" A turn-of-the-century Colonial Revival would be designed around the Classical Revival, and so on.
5. Frequently--especially in more modest homes--the exterior details give the best clues to the original design idea.
6. Play "What if..." Pretend that the original owners had access to the best design minds of the period. What might the house have looked like? For most old houses, it isn't crucial to re-create what the house actually looked like. It's good enough to know what it could have looked like.
7. Go slow. You are bound to change your mind as you develop more information. Work done in haste at the beginning is usually regretted later on.
8. Plan your interpretive restoration as an organic whole. Don't plunge into hands-on work until you have worked out all your ideas for the entire house on paper. Sure, you'll change your mind as you go along. But it is of immeasurable value to have a detailed blueprint so that you know exactly what you are changing from to.
9. Develop a system so that you can plan your interpretive restoration in an orderly way. Most people find a 3-ring binder most convenient, with sections set aside for each room, for the exterior, and for general restoration considerations. Other people find file folders most convenient. Whatever system you choose, this organized approach forces you to think out each area of the house and get your ideas down on paper. As you read books, visit house museums, etc., you can enter all the good ideas into your planning book.
10. Most important, have fun. It is the reversible decorative area where you can exercise your creative faculties. Working in the design idiom of a past historical style offers infinite possibilities--and is a stimulating intellectual exercise. When you change from a mere observer of old architecture into a designer of period spaces, you suddenly look at your surroundings with a heightened awareness. It is an exciting and enriching undertaking. 

COMING NEXT MONTH: A case history of an interpretive restoration.

Removing Wallpaper — Painted And Otherwise



AT ONE POINT, it was not considered necessary to remove old wallpaper before painting or putting down new wallpaper. But experience has shown that the paste on new wallpaper often softens the old paste, so that buckling and bulges can result. Even if paint is being applied, it is best to remove the old wallcovering to prevent future peeling—and the difficulties in removal that painted wallpaper can present at a future time.

IF THERE ARE ONLY one or two layers of wallpaper, removal should be relatively simple. First, test a small section to make sure it isn't the modern strippable type of paper that you can just pull off the wall. If so, your problems are over.

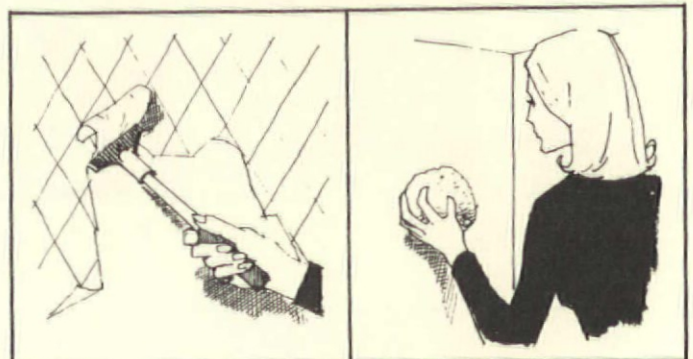
IF THE WALLPAPER was applied with conventional wallpaper paste, then water alone should do the trick. Some folks like to add vinegar to the removal water, claiming that it speeds the action somewhat.

YOU CAN APPLY the water to the wallpaper with a calcimine brush or other large paint brush. But the most efficient way to soak the paper is with a fine mist from an ordinary household garden sprayer. Although the garden sprayer may sound like over-kill, it doesn't get much more excess water on the surface than you would by sloshing with a brush. Be sure, of course, to spread newspaper on the floor to absorb any water that runs down the walls.

THE SECRET is in letting the water soak through thoroughly before trying to scrape the paper off. Wet down the entire room, then go back to the beginning. If the paper hasn't loosened sufficiently, wet it all down again. Then scrape off with a wallpaper scraper.

Painted Wallpaper


IF THE PAPER HAS BEEN PAINTED, there's more of a problem. The water can't get behind the paint film to dissolve the old wallpaper paste. The traditional solution has been to scratch the surface thoroughly with very coarse sandpaper or a nutmeg grater. Or else to make a large number of cross-hatch cuts with a knife or razor blade. This allows some water to seep behind the paper and to gradually loosen the paper. But it is a slow, tedious process.



Wallpaper scraper (left) can be used to strip wallpaper—wet or dry. After stripping, wash wall with sponge and warm water to remove old paste and bits of paper clinging to the surface.

A FASTER METHOD, preferred by decorating contractors today, is to remove the painted layer (and as much of the paper underneath as possible) with a wallpaper scraper. The wallpaper scraper is a long-handled stiff-bladed tool that is relatively new on the market. For example, Hyde Tools sells one they call a "Wallpaper Shaver" (Hyde Tool #33100).

IF THERE ARE SEVERAL layers of paper, it's possible that you won't be able to get all the layers off with the scraper. That's not a problem—as long as the layer with the paint comes off. Any remaining paper can be removed with soaking.

AFTER SCRAPING as much wallpaper off as possible, it's necessary to sponge the wall with water to remove paste and bits of old paper. For this job, see if you can locate a couple of natural sponges. They are far superior to the synthetic cellulose or urethane types for cleaning and rinsing. 

SPECIAL THANKS for technical advice to Howard Zucker—a professional decorator and member for 32 years of the Brotherhood of Painters and Decorators.

Restorer's Notebook



Beware: False Marble

THE NOTES ON CLEANING MARBLE (OHJ, Jan. 1979) should have added to it a strong caution. Before using this method, or any other method involving abrasive cleaners or solvents, make sure that what you are dealing with is, in fact, marble. Many of the beautiful veined "marbles" used in 19th century mantels were in fact made by applying paint to soapstone. Abrading or applying solvents to these finishes can be disastrous.

IF A MANTEL is natural marble, all faces of all pieces will show color and veining. If it is a painted finish, however, the painting was usually not carried beyond where it would be visible. So investigation should disclose some of the soapstone's characteristic dark gray color. First try looking under the overhang of the mantel shelf. If that area seems to match the rest of the mantel, then either move a loose piece if there is one (don't risk your mantel by trying to make one!) or scrape away at a small inconspicuous area to see whether the color is integral or just a surface layer.

THEORETICALLY, a drop of vinegar or dilute muriatic acid should react with real marble and generate small gas bubbles. But since the most inconspicuous places tend not to be places where liquids will stay put, this test does not seem as useful as the scratch test.

Allen Charles Hill, AIA
Winchester, Mass.

Handy Nail Starter

WHEN IT IS DIFFICULT to get small brads or nails started in a piece of wood, here's a hint that will save many banged fingers: Place the tip of the nail in a small ball of putty (window glazing compound). The putty will hold the nail in place while the nail gets started, and the putty is easily removed once the nail is being securely held by the wood.

Mrs. Orlin Petersen
Utica, S.D.

Bluing Nails

WHEN FACE NAILING wood such as flooring, paneling and wainscoting that is to be stained and finished naturally, I found that bluing the nail heads makes the nails look old and less conspicuous. A small bottle of gun bluing will do a lot of nails and is available at most sporting goods stores for about \$2.00.

Michael Overdorf
Elma, N.Y.

Homemade Drill Bits

PRE-DRILLED STARTER HOLES are often necessary when driving nails into old, hard wood. If you find that you don't own a drill bit of the proper size, don't panic. There's an easy homemade solution.

SELECT A NAIL that is the exact same size as the nail you will be using in the wood. With tinsnips, bolt cutter or hacksaw, remove the head from the nail. If the nail you are using is a finishing nail, the head is small enough so that you shouldn't have to remove it.

THE BLUNT END of the nail can then be inserted into a drill, either electric or hand operated. The nail then becomes a makeshift drill bit that will make very satisfactory pilot holes.

THIS METHOD works best with small nails used in fragile wood, such as mouldings and casings.

Jane Freeman
Brimfield, Mass.

Tape For Severe Cracks

SOME CRACKS in plaster are caused by continuing movement of the house, due to expansion/contraction and other structural motion. These kinds of cracks usually reappear after a short time if they are simply filled with spackle or patching plaster.

THERE IS A TYPE of nylon mesh tape used by sheetrock installers over joints when they are putting electric heating cable in a ceiling. This fabric tape is available in rolls like the paper tape.

WHEN EMBEDDED in joint compound over the crack, the nylon tape produces a very strong patch that will resist further cracking. In our area, the nylon tape available is "Imperial Tape—Type P" manufactured by U. S. Gypsum. Their main office is at 101 S. Wacker Dr., Chicago, Ill. 60606.

Wayne Kizer
Idaho Falls, Id.

Got Any Tips?

Do you have any hints or short cuts that might help other old-house owners? We'll pay \$15 for any short how-to items that are used in this "Restorer's Notebook" column. Send your hints to: Notebook Editor, The Old-House Journal, 69A Seventh Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217.

Products For The Old House

Helpful Publications

A Mechanical Doorbell

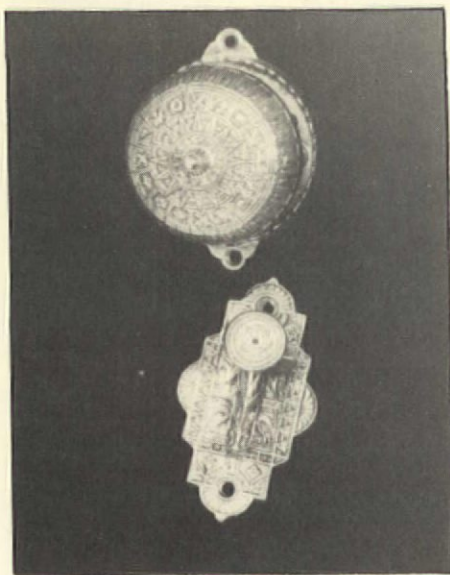
ONE OLD-HOUSE ITEM that many of our readers have asked us about is a mechanical doorbell assembly. A very handsome one is now being reproduced by Victorian Reproduction Enterprises, Inc.

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THESE ARE the spring-loaded type that gong once every time the front lever is pulled.

THE BELLS are \$49.95 each (complete with brass mounting screws) and \$1.50 for postage and handling.

TO ORDER, send check to: Victorian Reproduction Enterprises, Inc., Dept. OHJ, 1601 Park Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55404. Telephone: (612) 338-3636.



Hardware Encyclopedia

UNFORTUNATELY, the time is past when you could walk into your local hardware store and ask for "a thing-a-mijig that makes the whatzis go round" and come up with what you need. Unless you know exactly what to ask for, you are likely to come away empty-handed.

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A PRIMER: Preservation for the Property Owner can be ordered from: The Preservation League of New York State, Dept. OHJ, 13 Northern Boulevard, Albany, N. Y. 12210. The booklet is \$2.00 postpaid, and special rates are available for large quantity orders.

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