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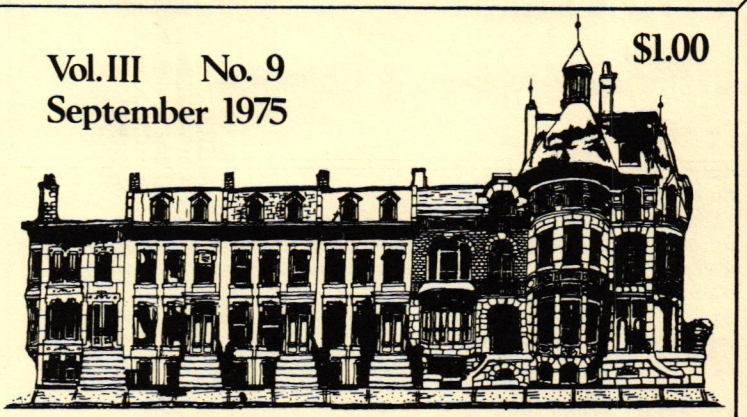
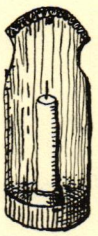
Renovation And Maintenance Ideas For The Antique House





Re-Creating The Effect Of Colonial Plaster Walls

By Jack R. Cunningham, The Saltbox
Rohrerstown, Pennsylvania

WHEN WE FIRST MOVED INTO OUR 1830 Saltbox, we did some things in our youthful enthusiasm that we wished later we hadn't. So we have been slowly going about setting aright some of our early mistakes.

THE HOUSE HAD BEEN COMPLETELY "REMUDDLED" into a semi-Victorian semi-contemporary house. Since there was so little of the original detailing left, we have been reconstructing a "what might have been" house, based on our study of homes of a similar period. The style, if we should give it a name, might be "rural American country dwelling."

THE PARTICULAR MISTAKE that was giving me a headache recently was in the kitchen. About 7 years ago, I had panelled the kitchen with an inexpensive grooved hardboard. (Well, at that time I didn't know!) My motives then were quite pure. We had an insulation problem with the kitchen, and I had figured that the 3/4 in. air space behind the furred-out panelling would help. It did—but it sure didn't look very authentic.

I HAD PREVIOUSLY HAD good luck in simulating the look of old rough plaster on some new sheetrock partitions, and it occurred to me that the same procedure might work equally well on those hideous hardboard panels. It worked out so well that I wanted to share my technique with other readers of The Journal who might be facing a similar problem.

FIRST, I painted the panels with a flat white oil-base paint to cover the blue that had previously been applied. Then I trowled on a thin skim-coat of "simulated plaster," which was in fact a thick mixture of joint compound —the kind you use on the seams in plasterboard partitions. I always use the dry powder and mix it myself to the desired consistency. (It costs about $4.00 per 25-lb. bag.) You can also get it premixed, but it is more expensive this way—and you have to work with it as it comes from the can; you can't adjust consistency the way you can when you mix your own.

ONE GREAT THING about joint compound is that it stays moist and workable for a long time. If you make up a large batch, you can even keep it overnight by just covering it with a damp cloth.

THE JOINT COMPOUND should be the consistency of thick mud so that it doesn't ooze off your trowel. Compound can be applied to the wall with a wide-bladed (6 in. or wider) joint knife or a cement trowel that has some flexibility in the blade. Work about a 2 ft. square area at a time. A wide

(Continued on page 8)

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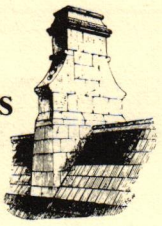
Coming Next Month

RE-CREATING GINGERBREAD

Notes From The Readers...

Restoring Fireplaces & Chimneys



To The Editor:

Here are some additional comments on the article about restoring fireplaces (July 1975). Anyone doing such a restoration should carefully examine the walls and floor around the suspected opening for measurements and moulding profiles of the original mantel. This may yield some valuable information that will help you locate a replacement that is appropriate for the house.

In rebuilding the firebox, it's not worth using portland cement mortar if the fireplace will get much use. The heat will erode ordinary mortar within a year. It's much better to use fireclay.

Flues, as you noted, should be thoroughly checked for soundness. Smoke bombs—such as those used by heating and air-conditioning personnel—can be a big help. Close all known openings in the chimney—including the top. A smoke bomb then placed in the stopped-up chimney will quickly show all its leaks. Such smoke bombs should be available at local heating & air conditioning supply houses.

Defective flues—if they are straight—can often be relined with stainless steel liners slipped in from the top. This is considerably easier than inserting chimney tiles. Stainless liners can be made up by most sheet-metal shops. Strength can then be added to the chimney by packing the area between the liner and the brickwork with air-entrained cement. This locks the whole assembly together without adding undue weight.

Chimneys that have not been used for many years should also be checked for electric wires, pipes, etc., that might have been run through them. Failure to check out this possibility could lead to some very unpleasant surprises.

Richard O. Byrne
Restoration Consultant
Mineral Point, Wis.

More On Matching Paint

To The Editor:

In the editing of my article on paint restoration (August 1975) a couple of alterations were made that could lead to misunderstandings.

The areas (1 to 2 sq. in.) that are suggested to be exposed on the painted surfaces are for general color perception—not "to determine the color of the first finish coats with some degree of precision."

There is a degree of uncertainty in determining the original color due to relative discolorations of mediums and pigments, etc. There is absolutely no uncertainty in matching any color to a Munsell chip.

The concept of finding the paint samples with the least amount of surface discoloration was omitted. These are found in all the cracks and corners where the wet paint, when first applied, could have dripped behind and/or accumulated to form small globules.

Frank S. Welsh
Ardmore, Pa.

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Cracks Between Floorboards—Cont'd.

To The Editor:

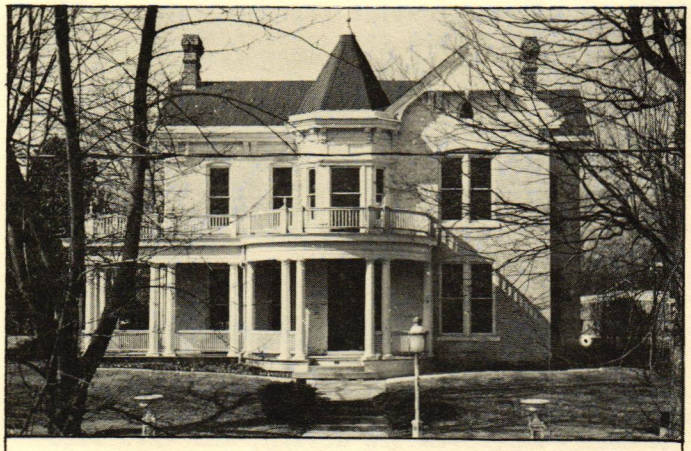
Cracks between floorboards allowing cold air to seep up from cellar or crawl space are a common problem in New England. A 12 to 18 in. wide board may move as much as half an inch between summer and winter. Some of my floor boards still move winter and summer, although they are close to 200 years old.

I suggest two approaches. First, thoroughly windproof the crawl space and heat it. For those with hot-water heat, it is relatively simple to re-route one of the hot-water pipes through the crawl space and to put a heating fin in the line. Careful sealing of the foundation is also called for. Second, for fillers one might consider using silicone caulking agents on the underside of the floor. These silicone agents are not cheap, but are waterproof, bond well and retain flexibility. They are ordinarily used in difficult glass glazing applications.

Silicone caulks are made by Dow, G.E and Rhodaseal. At six dollars a tube, the cost will mount up. But there's no easy way to get a New England farmhouse tight.

S. P. Browning III, M.D.
Norwich, Conn.

Victorian Lighting Fixtures



The Glenn House, built about 1880, is the headquarters of the Historical Association of Greater Cape Girardeau.

The Journal's Old-House Living feature is usually about a house that people live in. In this issue, our subject is a museum house that is presently undergoing restoration. Part of this process has been the re-creating and restoration of Victorian lighting fixtures. The general information on the lighting of the period and the specific examples of restored fixtures in the Glenn House will greatly aid the old-house owner who is also trying to restore Victorian lighting.

By Tom H. Gerhardt

THE GLENN HOUSE, when it was built about 1800, had kerosene lighting, as the plaster ceiling rosettes had hooks in them and there was no evidence of gas piping. In the 1890's, the large front porch and tower were added. Also, the house was wired for electricity at this time; throughout the upstairs rooms, floorboards were found replaced with woodscrews, indicating that the house had been wired after it was built.

THIS ALSO GREATLY aided the electrician in rewiring the house, as he knew which floorboards to lift. Because of the alterations made to the house in the 1890's, this is the restoration period. Therefore, the fixtures could be either early electric or kerosene and electric combined for the restoration.

Period Of Lighting

IN ESTABLISHING PRINCIPLES FOR lighting the old house, I think that the first thing the old-house owner should do is to assess the period of lighting in the house. If the original fixtures still remain, he is lucky and should proceed to the restoration of them, if restoration is necessary.

IF THE HOUSE IS COLONIAL, then the lighting should be restored as such. Unfortunately, lighting is often one of the most neglected areas in house restoration and often (with ridiculous results) we find Colonial fixtures (because they are readily available) in Victorian houses. In the United States, most Victorians used gas, kerosene, and/or electricity in their lighting fixtures—no candles!

THE RESTORATION that requires Colonial lighting fixtures is an easier route than the Victorian restoration, as many fine reproductions are made of the Colonial candle fixtures. This may be traced back to the early twenties when electric candle fixtures again became widely used.

NOW, THE VICTORIAN old-house owner really has problems if his original lighting fixtures are missing or if he needs glassware for them. Some gas and electric shades are satisfactorily reproduced; but a satisfactory reproduction of the actual fixtures themselves has not been produced, as Victorian fixtures are very detailed and ornate. Also, the demand for the fixtures has not been great enough to warrant satisfactory reproductions. So, the best thing for the Victorian old-house owner to do is to scout antique shops, junk stores, etc., looking for fixtures, glassware, pieces, and parts to replace missing fixtures and glassware.

Level Of Lighting

OF COURSE, many old-house owners want good lighting instead of the mediocre lighting of yesterday. It must be decided whether decorative lighting or utilitarian lighting is necessary in a room.

COLONIAL ELECTRIC-CANDLE lighting fixtures often pose major problems for use in utilitarian lighting, as flame-type bulbs in high wattages (they are not really made over sixty watts) often cause a great glare. Of course, a compromise can be made with these lighting fixtures by the addition of a small metal or silk shade over the bulb—allowing the candle to show—to cut down on the glare of the light bulb. However, these shades are not authentic, as they were really forced into popularity around World War I, before the decorative bulbs were extensively manufactured. Supplementary lighting, such as table and floor lamps, and ceiling beam lights will often allow the homeowner to use decorative lighting in rooms that also require utilitarian lighting.

MOST VICTORIAN LIGHTING FIXTURES required the use of glass shades (because of the more intensive light sources), which is an asset in using greater wattage lamps. These shades cut down on glare, with the fixtures still remaining authentic. Therefore, the Victorian fixtures can be decorative and can also be somewhat utilitarian without making a sacrifice in authenticity. Again, decorative lighting can be assisted by the aforementioned supplementary lighting sources.

Victorian Lighting Fixtures

BEING THAT VICTORIAN LIGHTING fixtures were much more diverse in fuel and design, much more complicated in design, and were used in more complicated arrangements, I think that the Victorian homeowner really needs greater help than the Colonial homeowner in lighting.

DURING THE VICTORIAN ERA, lighting fixtures using gas, kerosene, and/or electricity, or a combination of these were generally available as follows: Post lamps for street and yard lighting, chandeliers, wall brackets, single drop lights for alcoves and hallways, portables (table lamps), newel post lights (usually a statue on the bottom of the stair rail), and beam lights (usually restricted to electricity as they were placed on the ceiling in the corners of the rooms as supplemental lighting).

IT WAS NOT UNCOMMON for a room to have a center chandelier, wall brackets, alcove lights (such as in a bay window), and beam lights (if electricity was used). It seems that lights were much more evenly distributed through the room than today's modern single fixture in the ceiling. In the electric age in larger Victorian homes, it was not uncommon for a room to have over twenty light bulbs at the previously mentioned sources. And, by distributing smaller wattage light bulbs around in these types of fixtures, the Victorian homeowner can often bring the level of lighting up to utilitarian levels without glare.

FIXTURE FINISHES were often made in iron, white metal, brass, bronze, ormolu (a rough brass resembling gold), and oxidized copper. It is often easy to tell American fixtures from European fixtures because of the mechanics and design. European fixtures were extremely fancy and usually always made in larger cast sections (which means that they are very difficult to disassemble). American fixtures were always made in many small detachable parts.

EUROPEAN FIXTURES also made extensive use of ormolu coatings for finishes, whereas American fixtures would usually only highlight certain parts with ormolu. Fixtures with prisms were also made to a certain extent; however, most of them had bronze or brass frames. The prism fixtures in the late Victorian Era were more of the exception than the rule. Most Victorian fixtures were suspended on pipes rather than chains as the Colonials did. This was really a product of the necessity of gaslight fixtures having a supply pipe.

AN OFTEN PUZZLING SITUATION to those not acquainted with Victorian lighting is the use of fixtures featuring combinations of the various lighting fuels. This was particularly typical when a Victorian house was wired for electricity, which was available from 1870's on. The generators only ran in the evening hours (in some areas this situation existed up to the twenties), and there were many breakdowns. Therefore, electricity was often installed in existing houses and combined on fixtures with gas or kerosene lamps, allowing the latter to remain for emergency purposes. New Victorian houses wired from the beginning often featured the use of combination gas and electric fixtures that were stock made and very widely accepted.

Determining Appropriate Fixtures

BECAUSE THE VICTORIAN ERA had so many diverse fixtures and fuels available, this is a guide to aid the Victorian homeowner in determing what kind of lighting fixtures are appropriate.

For Victorian houses built prior to 1880—

▶ Detective work: The homeowner should look under existing fixtures for gas pipes (if fixtures have been replaced, they are often attached to existing gas pipes). Cellars and attics are also good places to look for gas pipes. And, just because a Victorian residence was not located near a public gas plant does not mean that it could have not had a home gas plant. If no gas pipes are found, then the house was probably lighted by kerosene (this will especially show itself in hooks, if they still remain where the new light fixtures are.)

▶ Fixtures used: Prior to 1880, fixtures, either kerosene or gas, were widely produced in iron and white metal, and were cast in most instances. The use of brass and bronze, however, was emerging more and more. Fixtures were also much more massive during this period and often employed the use of ceramic ornaments. The shades were mostly etched glass in beautiful designs. Even kerosene fixtures used gas shades around the chimneys to cut down the glare of the light.

For Victorian houses built from 1880 to 1900—

▶ Detective work: This Victorian homeowner has to be a first-class Sherlock Holmes, as the original lighting source could have been gas, electricity, kerosene, or any combination of these. Again, the first thing to do is to look under existing fixtures to determine if there are gas pipes. If yes, then it is known that gas was used for lighting. Then, determine the date electricity arrived in the locality and compare this date with when the house was erected. Usually the house will have had combination gas and electric fixtures if it was possible for electricity to be installed when it was built. If there are no gas pipes and electricity was not available when the house was erected, then the house was probably lighted by kerosene. Sometimes when electricity was added later, it was