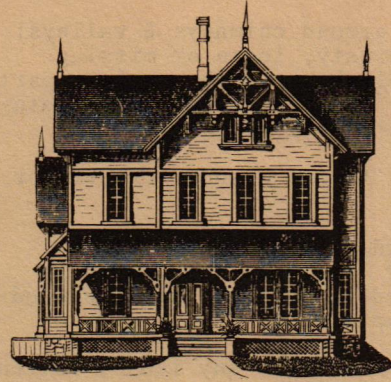


\$.50

Inspection Checklist for VINTAGE HOUSES



A Guide For Buyers And Owners

RESTORING AN OLD HOUSE can be one of the most creative and exciting experiences of your life. But a pre-1914 house can also be a trap for the unwary. Behind that charming facade may lurk a host of mechanical and structural faults that will tax your patience and empty your bank account.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF BUYING AN OLD HOUSE is knowing what you are getting into. Just about any flaw can be corrected—if you are willing to invest enough time and money. What is required is a sober appraisal of the physical deformities of your favorite old house—and balancing these against your reserves of cash and energy.

EVERYONE CAN IDENTIFY those superficial aspects of an old house that attract (or repel) you. This Inspection Checklist is designed to help you focus on some of the more mundane (but crucial!) physical factors before you get

totally carried away by that beautiful window and that lovely fireplace.

THIS GUIDE IS NOT DESIGNED to take the place of an evaluation by a professional house inspector. Getting the opinion of a reputable professional will usually cost between \$50 and \$150, and it is a sound investment when you are seriously considering a purchase. This Checklist will, however, help you eliminate from consideration those houses that are in too bad shape for your budget to handle.

IF YOU ALREADY OWN AN OLD HOUSE, use this Checklist as a guide for an annual check-up. Thorough inspections at regular intervals will help you catch little problems before they become big ones.

BUYING AN OLD HOUSE is like acquiring a spouse. And like all long-term relationships, it should be entered into with your eyes wide open. ■

Come Prepared

When setting out on an old-house inspection, you should have with you: Flashlight, small magnet, plumbline (string with small weight will do), penknife, a marble, pair of binoculars, pad and pencil, and an inspection checklist. Wear old clothes so you can closely inspect important places like the cellar and underneath porches.

The Roof:

A sound, tight roof is the first line of defense against the #1 enemy of an old house: Water. If the roof is in bad shape, you should plan on repairing—or replacing—it right away.

1. Type of roof on house (arranged in approximate order of longevity):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Slate (1) | <input type="checkbox"/> Wood Shakes (6) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Copper (2) | <input type="checkbox"/> Wood Shingles (7) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ceramic Tile (3) | <input type="checkbox"/> Galvanized Steel (8) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tar & Gravel (4) | <input type="checkbox"/> Asphalt Shingles (9) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asbestos Tile (5) | <input type="checkbox"/> Roll Roofing (10) |

2. Pitched Roof: Any sign of missing, broken or warped shingles or tiles? (This could mean roof will have to be replaced soon. It can also mean that there is water damage inside.)

Yes No

NOTE: Binoculars can give you a good close-up view if it is impossible to actually get up on the roof.

3. Asphalt shingles: Are the mineral granules getting thin and do edges of shingles look worn?

4. Asphalt shingles: Does roof look new but lumpy? (New roof may have been applied directly over old shingles. No way to tell what sins may have been covered over.)

5. Flat roof: Any sign of bubbles, separation or cracking in the asphalt or roofing felt? (Roofing should be flat and tight to roof; it shouldn't feel squishy under foot.)

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 6. Flashing around chimneys & valleys: Any sign of rusty, loose or missing flashing? (Flashing is the weakest part of any roof. Copper is the best flashing and will show a green patina.) | Yes | No |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Chimneys: Is the masonry cracked or crumbling? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Do the old chimney flues have a tile lining? (If not, they could be a fire hazard in conjunction with wood-burning fireplaces.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Gutters: Are there any loose, rotted or missing gutters? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Does the ridge of the roof sag? (This could be normal settling that comes with age—or it could be caused by rotted rafters. Check further!) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. Cornice: Is there badly peeling paint on the cornice—especially the underside? (This can be sign of a roof leak that is spilling water into the cornice.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Exterior Walls:

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Yes | No |
| 1. Do exterior walls seem plumb? (You can check with a plumb line; a weighted string will do. Out-of-plumb walls can be a sign of serious foundation problems.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Sight along exterior walls. Any sign of major bulges? (This could signal major structural flaws.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Do doors line up squarely in their frames? (Out-of-square doors can be another sign of possible foundation trouble.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

NOTE: Almost all old houses settle in a haphazard manner. So signs of sag are not necessarily a major drawback. But it does mean a thorough investigation should be made to find the root causes. Some sags require no remedy; others can be cured with a few extra support posts. Still others may require major foundation surgery.

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 4. Is decorative woodwork firmly attached to house and tightly caulked to prevent water penetration? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Is exterior paint fresh and in good condition? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. If paint is not new, is it powdering and chalking to a dull powdery surface? (This is the way old paint should look.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Is paint peeling, curling and blistering? (This could mean a serious water problem—either a leak or lack of sufficient vapor barrier in wall.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Are there open joints around door frames, window frames and trim? (These will have to be caulked.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 9. Are joints between dissimilar materials (e.g., wood and masonry) well protected with flashing or caulk? | Yes | No |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Is putty around window glass sound and well painted? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. Masonry Walls: Any signs of cracks? (Horizontal cracks and hairline cracks in bricks are not a major problem; cracks that run vertically through bricks and mortar are more serious.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. Is mortar soft and crumbling; are bricks missing or loose? (Loose masonry is vulnerable to attack by water...and having a masonry wall repointed with fresh mortar is expensive.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. Has masonry been painted? (It will have to be re-painted about every 5 years, or else stripped—a major task.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. Stonework (especially sandstone): Any sign of spalling, cracking or crumbling of the stone? (This can be expensive to repair.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. Clapboards: Are many loose, cracked or missing? (This is an open invitation to water—and rot.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16. Shingles: Are they thick and well nailed? (Thin, badly weathered shingles may have to be replaced.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17. Do shingles have a natural finish? (Natural finishes are easier to re-apply to shingles than is paint.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Termites & Rot

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Yes | No |
| 1. Termites: Any sign of veins of dirt on interior or exterior walls? (These are termite mud tunnels. Look for them on foundation, under porches, steps and on cellar walls.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Does wood near the ground (both outside and inside) pass the "pen knife test"? (Wood should be probed with pen-knife to test for soundness. Check areas such as cellar window frames, sills, floor beams and posts, porches and steps.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

NOTE: Unsound wood can be caused by either termites or rot. Rot can be arrested by shutting off the source of moisture. Termites call for chemical warfare. If at all unsure about the cause of bad wood, call in the experts.

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 3. Is all exterior wood at least 6-8 in. above the ground? (If not, this is an inviting target for termites and/or rot.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Is there any vegetation close to the house? (Vegetation holds moisture in wood; be sure to check behind it for rot.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Any signs of rot in cornice or attic beams? (Leaking roofs and gutters often spill water into top of house where it goes undetected for long periods.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

The Attic:

- | | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Any sign of leaks (such as dark water stains) on the underside of roof, especially around chimneys, valleys and eaves? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Is attic adequately vented? (Check especially for signs of mildew on underside of roof boards.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



Yes No

- | | Yes | No |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 7. Windows: Do sash move up and down smoothly? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 8. Do window frames show signs of substantial water leakage? (Look for chipped and curling paint at bottom of sash and sills. Although quite unsightly, this can be cured with caulk, putty and paint.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|

Insulation:

NOTE: Most houses before 1940 had no built-in insulation. However, some old houses will have had insulation added. Houses with brick or stone walls rarely have any wall insulation. With cost of fuel soaring, a well-insulated house is a big asset.

- | | Yes | No |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Attic: Any loose fill insulation visible between attic floor joists? (This is best place for attic insulation.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2. Has insulation been blown into side walls? (You may have to take owner's word for this. In cold weather you can tell how good wall insulation is by feeling the inside of an exterior wall and comparing with temperature of an interior partition. They should feel about the same.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|

Interior Spaces:

- | | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Are there any signs of damp plaster? (This means leaks coming either from roof or internal pipes. Check especially top-floor ceilings, the inside of exterior walls, and ceilings and partitions under bathrooms.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2. Is there any loose plaster in walls or ceilings? (Cracks in plaster are par for the course—but plaster that is spongy when you push on it will have to be repaired or replaced.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 3. Is there a noticeable bounce to the staircase when you jump on it? Are there any noticeable gaps between treads, risers and side stringers? (Substantial vibration may mean structural problems that will be quite costly to correct.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 4. Is flooring original and in good repair? (Floors covered with carpet or linoleum can harbor many problems—especially if you want to restore the original flooring.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5. Do floors have a pronounced sag or tilt? (Simple test: Place a marble on the floor and see if it rolls away. This could just be normal settling or serious structural flaws. Check for cause.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 6. Do floors vibrate and windows rattle when you jump on floors? (This is symptom of inadequate support. Among possible causes: Undersized beams, inadequate bridging, cracked joists, rotted support posts. Often this can be cured fairly simply with a few new support posts.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|

Foundation:

- | | Yes | No |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Is there a dug cellar with wood sills resting solidly on a masonry foundation well above ground level? (Some old structures have "mud sills"—heavy beams resting directly on the ground. These eventually have to be replaced, which is a major undertaking.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2. Is mortar in foundation soft and crumbling? (This is not necessarily serious as long as there's no sign of sag in the structure; ditto for foundation walls laid dry—without mortar.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 3. Are there any vertical cracks in the foundation wall? (This could be serious, or it could be from settling that stopped years ago. Have an engineer check it.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 4. Does ground slope away from foundation so that rain water drains off? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5. Do downspouts have splash blocks to divert water away from house? (If downspout goes into ground, be sure it isn't pouring water into the earth next to the foundation—a flooded basement is the likely result.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|

The Cellar:

- | | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Do sills (the wood beams at the top of the foundation walls) show signs of rot or termites? (Probe with penknife.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2. Any sign of dampness on the underside of floors around pipes? (If leaks have gone undetected for some time, there could be substantial wood rot.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 3. Does basement show signs of periodic flooding? (It's a good sign if current owner stores important tools and papers on cellar floor. Bad signs: Rust spots, efflorescence or mildew on walls, material stored on top of bricks to raise it above floor level.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 4. Any sign of sagging floors, rotted support posts or jury-rigged props to shore up weak flooring? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|



6. Are the water pipes and large waste pipes in good condition? (The cellar is the best place to evaluate the over-all condition of the plumbing. For example, look for patches on the waste pipes; it's an indicator of advanced age. Replacement is expensive.)

Yes No

Electrical System:

1. Does wiring in cellar appear to be a rat's nest of old frayed wires?
2. Does main power box in cellar have at least 100 amp. capacity? (An up-to-date installation will have capacity marked on it. An old fuse box with only 3-4 fuses in it means there may only be 30-40 amp.—far too little. A re-wiring job will be needed.)
3. Do all ceiling light fixtures have wall switches?
4. Is there at least one electrical outlet on each wall in every room?
5. Is there any sign of surface-mounted lampcord extension wiring? Multiple cords plugged into a single outlet? (This is a tell-tale of underwiring. Expect to hire some electricians.)

Plumbing:

1. Are water pipes copper or brass? (If they are, magnet won't stick to them. Copper or brass is longer-lasting than galvanized iron. Magnet won't stick to lead piping either. Lead will be soft and silvery when scratched with pen-knife. Lead piping will probably have to be replaced shortly.)
2. Is water pressure adequate? (Test by turning on top floor sink faucets; then turn on bathtub and flush toilet. If water slows to a trickle, piping may be inadequate or badly clogged with scale.)
3. Is plumbing connected to a city sewer system?
4. If there is a septic tank, was it cleaned in the last 3-4 years? (Over-loaded septic tanks are common source of trouble. It's best to call serviceman who did last cleaning and get his opinion of the system. Repairs can easily run over \$1,000.)
5. Is water supply from:
- City main Drilled well Shallow well

NOTES ON WATER SUPPLY: City main is the most dependable source; shallow (dug) well is the least desirable. If water is from a well it is best to get it analyzed by the County Agent for fitness. If water is from a spring, beware of claims that "spring never runs dry" unless you can verify it. You may end up paying to drill a well during a long dry summer.

Heating System:

1. Was heating plant originally designed to burn coal? (If so, it is probably more than 25 years old and may be a candidate for replacement.)
2. Does heating system operate satisfactorily? (You can test system even on a summer day: Move thermostat setting above room temperature. Heat from a hot-air furnace should appear at registers within a few minutes; in a steam or hot-water system radiators should heat up in 15-20 min.)
3. Will fuel bills present you with any unpleasant surprises? (Copies of fuel bills from the last heating season are the best measure of the heating system's efficiency.)
4. Is capacity of hot water heater at least 40 gal.? (This is minimum required by a family of 4 with an automatic clothes washer.)
5. Any sign of leaks or rust spots on the hot-water heating tank? (Check by peeking through small door that gives access to the pilot light.)
6. On steam heating systems, do floorboards around radiators show signs of black stains and rot? (This comes from leaks and indicates system hasn't been well maintained.)

Beware The 'Remuddled' House

Many old houses have had decorative details stripped off during past remodeling—better termed "remuddling." This robs the house of its original charm and character...and lessens its long-term market value. This can be important should you ever have to re-sell the house. If in doubt as to whether a particular house has been remuddled, you can get some help from "The Field Guide to Old-House Styles." It is a 4-pg. folder that shows the 17 most common old-house styles in the U.S. It is available for 50¢ from The Old-House Journal at the address shown below.

The Old-House Journal

199 BERKELEY PLACE
BROOKLYN, N Y 11217
(212) 636-4514

THE OLD-HOUSE JOURNAL is a monthly publication specializing in techniques for the restoration, maintenance and decoration of houses built prior to 1914. Articles emphasize practical, do-it-yourself methods. Subscriptions are \$12 per year. Annual indexes and all back issues are available.

