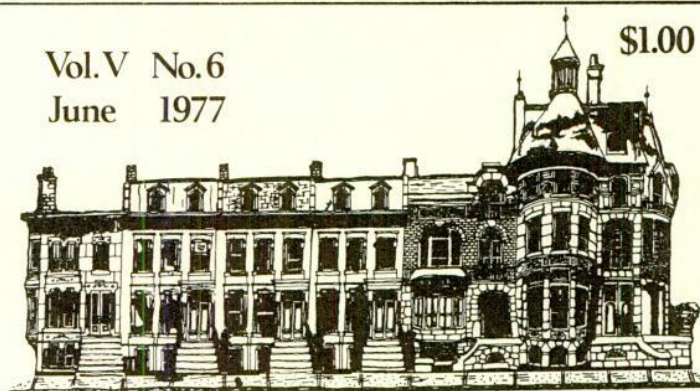


THE OLD-HOUSE JOURNAL

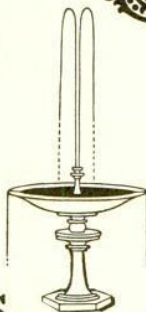
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Renovation And Maintenance Ideas For The Antique House

Victorian Fountains And Urns



By Tom H. Gerhardt

FROM MID-19th century until World War I, mass-produced cast iron supplied decorative beauty to the home and lawn. Used for fences, cresting, railings, columns, urns, statues, fountains, and lawn furniture, it was almost as common as the "molded-stone" garden ornaments that are available today... although far more durable and detailed. There was never as many fountains and urns as other works of art in cast iron and they seem to have had a higher mortality rate as they could be, and often were, easily removed and donated to scrap drives or sold to the dump. Therefore, the remaining ones should be considered prized possessions.

FOUNDRIES SUCH AS Mott, Walbridge (Buffalo, New York), and Fisk (Danbury, Conn.) cast these Victorian beauties and shipped them by train and boat throughout the country (Colorado's wealthy mining towns even had their share.) Major centers of production seemed to be located for the most part in the Northeast. Often sparking the interest of owners of private residences in such finery, public parks and streets boasted large examples of this iron art--decorative horsetroughs; man, dog and horse drinking fountains; and huge decorative fountains complete with life-



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Coming Next Month

PRACTICAL HINTS FOR VICTORIAN DECORATION

size figures and smaller drinking fountains around the edges.

FOR TODAY'S VICTORIAN HOMEOWNER, iron urns and fountains are important elements of decoration that are often missing from the lawn or the conservatory, or are still present but in poor condition. On the other hand, they are often added to provide greater interest and authenticity for the Victorian house where the owner can find no evidence of this decorative art ever being present.

Iron Urns

IRON URNS WERE USED in greater proliferation than the fountains as the latter works of art took plumbing and water to operate. Being available in basically just a few styles, these urns were manufactured with square bases or with more decorative figured bases and were made in sections so that they could be taken apart and moved around very easily. For the most part, the pieces are interchangeable and usually starting with a base (of which the larger ones are made of separate iron panels held together by tie rods) the pedestal, water reservoir, and bowl with or without bolted-on handles (handles were optional and

[\(Continued on page 66\)](#)

Spots On Furniture And Woodwork

By Frank Broadnax, President
Broadnax Refinishing Products

H EAT OR MOISTURE can cause spots on furniture or woodwork. The cure for spotting conditions is the question I am asked most frequently on my lecture tours of the Southeast. In this column I'll review some of the specific problems I have run into.

FIRST OF ALL, about 98% of all furniture polishes contain wax...often beeswax. This is a soft substance—and subject to change by moisture. When condensation from cold glasses (or steam from hot cups of coffee) gets under the wax, it turns white. After the surface dries off, the white rings remain.

OTHER COMMON SOURCES of water that cause white spotting: Spilling water on a table while watering plants; water splashes from a sink that run down the front of a cabinet; mopping floors that gets water on the bottom of furniture or cabinets. I've even had a case where a person accidentally sprayed Lysol on a piece of furniture, causing the entire front to turn white.

REMEMBER: Water is wood's worst enemy! If water penetrates beyond the wax, the problem gets much worse—water turns wood black.

T O REMOVE WHITE SPOTS from waxed finishes, the easiest method I have found starts with a small piece of soft cotton cloth (old sheet, pillow case, undershirt or baby diaper). Moisten it by running water over the cloth—then squeeze out ALL excess water. Put a small amount of toothpaste on the damp cloth and rub the spot. Use one of the old brands such as Colgate, Ipana, Pepsodent, etc., that contain a fine pumice abrasive. (Modern brands like Gleem don't contain abrasives—and thus are useless for this job.)

USE THE INDEX FINGER to provide pressure as you rub the spot. The whitened wax will come off—leaving the rest of the finish untouched. Another mild abrasive that you might use is cigar or cigarette ashes. Mix with some mayonnaise to form a paste. Rub this on the white spot with the damp cloth.

I F YOU USE WAX POLISH on furniture or floors, I suggest removing the old wax at least once every 4-5 years with mineral spirits. Then if you must use wax, apply a fresh thin coat. Otherwise, you may generate a problem like the one I ran into recently in a Baptist Church here in Georgia. The church was threatened with a lawsuit because people were ruining their clothing when they sat in the pews.

THE CHURCH-GOERS were bogging down in 50 years of wax polish—and upon rising they were taking some of the wax with them. A local refinisher had given them an estimate of \$3,000 to re-finish the pews. I showed them how stripping off the old wax with mineral spirits could achieve the same results. One gallon of mineral spirits, along with some #0000 steel wool and 8 working hours for the janitor solved the problem!

W HITE SPOTS can also occur on clear finishes that don't have any wax on them. Often these can be taken care of by applying a thin coat of lemon oil (or our Broadnax Wood Preservative) with a soft cotton cloth. If the finish is gummy, you might want to apply the oil with #0000 steel wool—rubbing very lightly so as not to damage the finish.

I HAVE BEEN CALLED IN to give estimates on refinishing kitchen cabinets and panelling—when all that was needed to restore this woodwork was lemon oil or our wood preservative. A dried, bleached, whitish appearance can usually be fixed with a \$2.00 bottle of lemon oil preservative—quite a saving over a \$1,500 restoration fee.

RATHER THAN WAXING, I recommend applying lemon oil or our Broadnax Wood Preservative once a year. It keeps the wood from drying out, keeps the wood looking good—and helps keep the moisture OUT.

Editor's Note: Free information about the Broadnax wood preservative can be obtained by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: Frank Broadnax, P.O. Box 196, 11a, GA 30647.

NEXT MONTH: What To Do About Black Spots.

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A Greek Revival Phoenix

By Meg Houser

FIRE IS A TERRIBLE WORD if you own and love an old house. Our house was built of the wood from its own land, between 1809 and 1822, and was a fine example of the transition from Federal to Greek Revival architecture. So it wasn't just the place of our happiest memories; it was our proudest possession. When we had to move to Iowa in 1972, we put caretaker tenants in it. Alas, in December 1975 it burned, a few months after our second set of tenants moved in.

WE WERE TOLD THAT the house was a total loss. We drove back East immediately, and found the house roofless and gutted--in ruins. We stayed several days, saying goodbye to it.

ON THE FINAL DAY I was sitting in the car, looking my last at the house's beautiful front, with its stately Federal pilasters and elegantly detailed doorway. I suddenly realized what I should have seen the first day--that many of the things we loved best about the house were still there.

THE PEDIMENT WAS DAMAGED, its oval window with the delicate lead tracery gone, the applied Greek Key motif in the frieze gone; but the facade below it was almost intact. And, inside, you could walk around in the parlor and front hall; their floors, and the joists under them, were untouched. The inside shutters and panelling and some of the old glass in the parlor windows were still there, though the paint was blistered.



After the fire, not much more than the facade was left. All of the windows with the shutters remaining were saved.



THE MANTELPIECE WAS SMOKY but undamaged. There was good wood under the blackened paint of the hall stairs. The beautiful cherry banister was charred and twisted but the applied scroll-sawn decorations that ascended with the stair were there, though the elliptical ceiling with its concentric mouldings was gone, as was the curving wall. In the big bedroom over the parlor the floorboards were all right, and so were the mantelpiece, the door and frame, and some of the window enframements--though these things, like the stair hall, stood under the open sky. Some of the exterior walls still stood, and the chimneys, and a few interior partitions.

I BEGAN TO FEEL a wild hope, that the house could be rebuilt.

WHEN WE GOT BACK to Iowa I telephoned a builder who had previously worked on the house, and asked him to go over and look at it. He called back to say it couldn't be saved. Even the rooms that appeared relatively undamaged had been fatally charred within the walls, he said; the stairs could never be made safe; the first wind would take down the facade. He urged us to forget our crazy idea.

A RESPECTED RESTORATION BUILDER told us the same thing, and worse, a few weeks later. Other builders refused to bid. Still other builders promised to bid, or even said they had bid, and then the bids never came. Every builder or architect who went to look at the house thought we were kidding. It was an impossible situation, trying to rebuild a ruin from a thousand miles away.

THEN MY BROTHER in Washington told me to call the New York State Parks Department, because they know about preserving old houses. The Parks Department told me to call The Landmark Society of Western New York, in Rochester.

THE FIRST PERSON I TALKED TO at The Landmark Society was Mrs. Elizabeth Stewart. She gave me immediate comfort, encouragement and advice. And then she told Mrs. Patrick Harrington, the Society's Executive Director, about our house and what had happened to it. It was Mrs. Harrington and The Landmark Society, in the purest altruism I have ever witnessed in a long life, who made it possible to rebuild our house; out of their generosity of spirit and their skill and experience, they made it happen.

MRS. STEWART SUGGESTED that I telephone the famous preservation architect, Carl F. Schmidt. Mr. Schmidt was immediately kind, saying he would go and look at the house even though it was 60 miles away. After he saw it, he said that much of it could be salvaged, but the cost would be prohibitive --\$100,000 to \$150,000. We had \$28,000 from the insurance; \$25,000 after the rest of the existing mortgage was paid.

AS FAR AS I KNOW it is not possible to insure an old house for anything like its value or replacement cost, at least not in that part of New York, where there are still dozens of fine Greek Revival and Federal houses standing, not particularly appreciated. Insurance companies look skeptically at any attempt to insure a house like ours against the loss of its architectural and historical value.

IT WAS PAINFUL to have our loved house turned into a replica of itself. But it was much more painful to lose it all. So we began to ask banks to give us a mortgage. We thought we could rebuild the main block for about \$60,000 if we did all the detailed restoration ourselves. We then began the search for a builder.

WHEN IT HAD BECOME CLEAR that only a small part of the house could be saved, Mrs. Har-

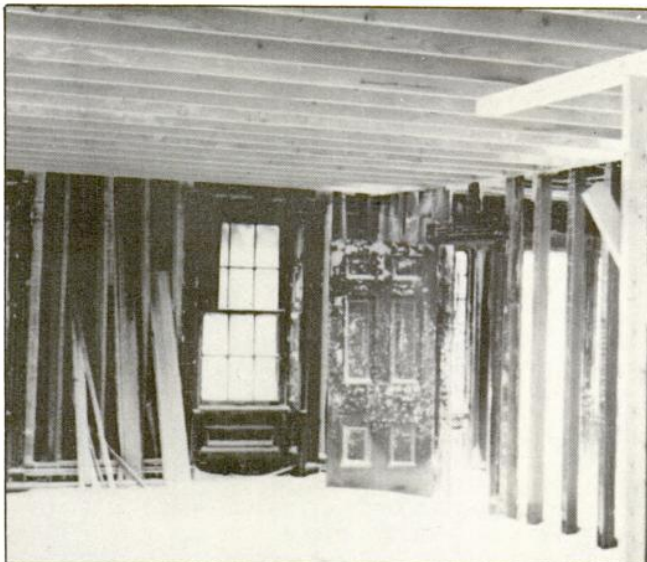
ington asked two young men finishing their doctoral work in History of Architecture at Cornell to look at the house and make a report to the Society. The two men, Carl Stearns and Kevin Harrington, agreed that the house had had architectural merit, and Kevin Harrington said that the facade alone was worth every effort to save it.

WE WAVERED NO LONGER. We had been entrusted with a beautiful thing. It had been destroyed while under our care, and we had an obligation to save what we could of it. Elaine Harrington kept urging us to look at a badly-burned Federal house being restored in Ithaca by a young builder she and Kevin knew about. We resisted; we had tried so many builders. One day we did walk by the house and as a result, the builder promised to come look at our house.

HE CAME THE NEXT SATURDAY, July 3, 1976, the day before we had to leave for Iowa. Alexander Ardwin (Sandy) said he could save most of the front two rooms, and some of the bedroom over them, and of course the facade and probably the front door and pediment. And he could begin work at once. We were filled with joy, and we still are.

WHEN WE GOT BACK to Iowa, the last bank turned us down, but what did we care? Sandy Ardwin was going to save a third of the main block of our house. We asked Sandy what he would do for \$28,000 to \$30,000. He said he would demolish the ruined part of the house, carefully removing or leaving in place what could be used. He would build a new house, an almost exact replica--except for the sad fact that it would no longer be a timber-framed house but a modern balloon-frame.

THE NEW HOUSE would enclose and preserve most of the two main rooms and some of the bedroom above, and would preserve the facade.



Parlor, in the midst of re-creation, with inside shutters and panelling left in place and new joists for upstairs bedroom floor. Parlor floor is under snow.



The house now shows the rebuilt portion, with the pediment removed for copying and salvage. The heavy bracing and stud-work is original.

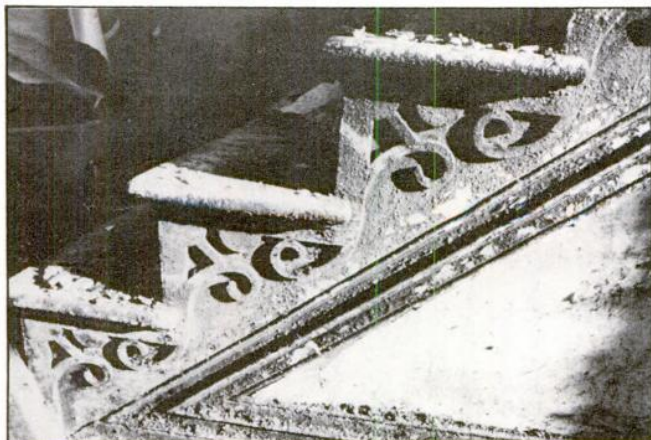
HE WOULD REPLACE THE PEDIMENT, though we would have to manage the window and window grille and the original and copied mouldings. He would build a new main chimney. He would re-create the oval ceiling and the curving stairwall of the front hall. He would build a one-storey, somewhat shorter kitchen wing, which Kevin had told us was its original form. (The second storey of the wing, dating only from about 1900, was not in scale with the rest of the house, in any case.) He would put in a new bathroom downstairs, and side and roof the whole house, providing subfloors and the studding for bearing partitions.

THIS WAS ALL WE HAD HOPED FOR. Now, work on our house is going on.

THE DEMOLITION was done with great care and skill. Before and during it Kevin Harrington and Martha Gates carefully photographed the structure for documentation, and the mouldings for copying. Also, Mrs. Gates copied all the mouldings with a moulding comb. The pediment was removed and the bricks stored, to be used as material for paths in a projected formal garden, like the one in the February 1977 issue of *The Old-House Journal*.

THE ORIGINAL STUDDING in two partitions was saved, and the old wide boards in all three rooms. The joists under the big bedroom had to be replaced, not because of the fire but because they sagged dangerously, even before the fire. The mantelpieces were removed and carefully stored, and the frames of windows and doors remain in place, in the front of the parlor and in the hall. Other window frames were removed and will be put back into the new walls. The walls are up to the top of the second floor, though the snows came before the roof could go on.

THIS SUMMER we will, ourselves, paint the exterior and repair the damaged pilaster and shutters. We will have a new oval window put in the pediment; the window grille will be copied from our photograph and re-created, in pewter-finish iron, by a firm we found in *The Old-House Journal* Buyers' Guide: Steve Kayne Hand Forged Hardware in Smithtown, N. Y.



The Housers are hoping that some of these charred decorations can be duplicated.

STEVE KAYNE will also be able to duplicate our 5 in. brass front door key, once we remove our lock and send it to him. E. N. Pfaff and Sons, near us in Horseheads, New York, will duplicate the Greek Key moulding that frames the pediment, from a piece we still have. Using these new parts, we hope my husband will be able to restore the pediment and the facade in detail, under the supervision of Martha Gates.

ON THE INSIDE OF THE HOUSE, we will scrape off all the charred paint, using the instructions in "Restoration and Preservation," Carl Schmidt's new book. (\$24.50, plus tax and postage, from Mr. Schmidt in Scottsville, N.Y.) We will plane the surfaces smooth; Mr. Schmidt feels that sandpaper raises the grain and thus dulls the wood. We'll repair with putty the damaged medallions at the corners of door and window frames. We hope to remove the modern front steps and put suitable wooden ones there.

WE WILL DECORATE in the 1810-1820 style, using Mr. Schmidt's fascinating book, which describes in detail just how those houses were painted and papered, and in what colors--even how to make the paint! We'll be advised by Kevin and Elaine Harrington, and we'll use the household inventories for that house, found by Kevin as he documented its history. When we put the described rag rug in the kitchen, or aspire to the Brussels carpet once used in the hall, we will feel the resonance of the house's past.

WE WILL NEVER PRETEND that the replica part is original, but we will try to make the combination of replica and real into a beautiful, harmonious and satisfying new entity.

BY THE END OF THE SUMMER the five main rooms will be done, and then we're going to have a wedding! Our second daughter and her fiancé are waiting for the house, to be married in. And so a joyous celebration will begin a new life for our phoenix house.

(Photos by Martha Gates and Kevin Harrington)



This One



4F28-SLQ-NAU4

The original house as it looked in December 1959, the day the Housers moved in.



An iron octagon-shaped aquarium with plant brackets, the familiar seahorse base, and a less-familiar small umbrella boy spraying water made the long Michigan winters more pleasant in the tiled conservatory of the Edward Buckley residence, Manistee. The conservatory remains with only a cement patch in the tile floor where this beautiful aquarium-fountain once stood. (Photograph courtesy of the Manistee County Historical Museum.)

(FOUNTAINS AND URNS--Cont'd from page 61)

if present at one time are often missing) are all stacked together without being bolted. The dead weight prevents them from being turned over by the wind; however, they are still vulnerable to the thrust of vandals.

THE IRON URNS are often used on balustrades near the house, along driveways, or just out in the center of the yard. In the house, the smaller versions can be used in the conservatory or plant room. When iron urns are placed on the lawn, a concrete pad should be provided so that the hollow base does not start sinking to one side; and when they are placed indoors, a heavy wooden pad with casters makes it easy to roll them around.

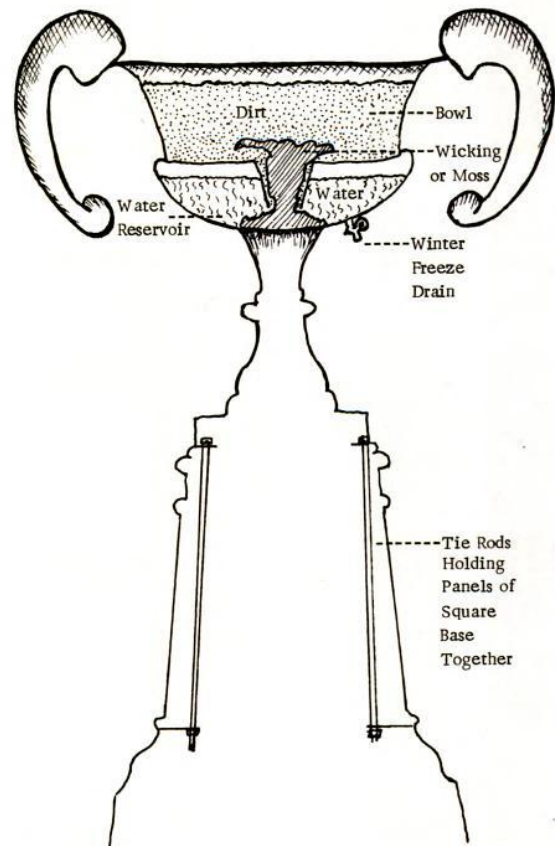
THE WATER RESERVOIR is often the least understood part of these urns. It is the pan that receives the bowl where the flowers are planted. And in the bottom of the bowl, there is usually a funnel-shaped opening that extends downward into the water reservoir. This is where wicking or moss is placed so that the bowl is to some extent self-watering when the

water reservoir is kept filled with water. If the urn is left out during the winter it is a good idea to place a drain in this reservoir to prevent it from filling with water and breaking. If a drain is not already present, a hole drilled at the lowest point and tapped eighth-inch pipe threads can be equipped with a pet cock to be opened in the winter.

WITH PLANTS AND FLOWERS selected according to geographical location, these urns are beautiful when filled with appropriate and compatible plants that seem to spray upward and overflow downward like a fountain. Plants such as the spike (*Dracaenas Indivisa*), that grows quite large if taken in during the winter year after year, as well as fern, caladium, geranium and coleus provide height. Variegated Vinca and wandering Jew trail downward.

DUSTY MILLER (a plant that has now escaped to the roadsides) provides a complete variation in color with its grayish-white lacelike leaves. There are really all sorts of possibilities in planting urns that provide a very artistic and Victorian effect.

DIAGRAM OF BOWL, WATER RESERVOIR, PEDESTAL, AND BASE OF IRON URN



Iron Fountains

ALTHOUGH THE IRON DECORATIVE FOUNTAIN is a more complicated embellishment to the Victorian setting, nothing can duplicate a certain restful, peaceful, and yet mysterious feeling found in the sound of a fountain's falling water or can imitate the glistening spray that sparkles in the sunlight.

THE CAST IRON FOUNTAIN was the first type to be mass produced. Available with its own iron pool, it eliminated the use of dirt ponds or lead tanks and was often installed by homeowners as a most pretentious symbol of elegance in celebration of the completion of a town's waterworks.

IN ADDITION TO its presence on the lawn, it was often used inside the house (often in the form of a large aquarium) in a bay window or a conservatory to hasten away the gloom of fall and winter by providing the sounds and delights of spring and summer through those bleak seasons of the year.

HOWEVER, because of the rising costs of water (in the beginning it was sold at cheap, flat rates based on the number of fountains, hydrants, cocks, and water closets) and the difficulty of maintenance caused by a lack of knowledge along these lines, many iron fountains were allowed to go dry, fell in poor repair, and were removed. Therefore, the few remaining ones or pieces and parts are highly prized today as ornamentation for the Victorian home. The availability of small electric pumps that consume little energy has provided a method of making them workable one more without such a great expense in water.

Fountains for the Lawn

BASICALLY, the iron fountains include: (1) A central section with one, two or three spills (bowls where the water runs over the edges) that are stacked together like the urns and are often surmounted by a small iron or lead statue, (2) A large iron or lead statue on a low base. The central section is often surrounded by a round iron basin or concrete basin with a sculptured edge. The weight of course is terrific--a



This fine example of a residential fountain is located in Anna, Illinois, and through repairs could run once more. It shows the typical cement basin that some of the iron fountains were constructed with.

three-spill fountain, 8 ft., 2 in. high with a 7 ft., 6 in. iron basin costing \$215 (painted) and \$235 (bronzed) in 1909 from N. O. Nelson Manufacturing Company weighed 1,400 lbs. When having the iron basin on the Onekama, Michigan, Village Park fountain moved for repairs after being damaged by an automobile, the author found it necessary to find seven men to lift it onto a truck.

THE ELABORATE AND WHIMSICAL DECORATIVE motifs of the different foundries for these fountains follow the same patterns with most parts being interchangeable. The iron basins have an edge with frogs or turtles nestled in rocks among waterlily and/or ivy leaves (a rare version is the one that was at the D. W. Filer home, Manistee, Michigan--it had light bulbs popping up around the edge for nighttime viewing.) The pedestal under the first spill is the most ornate, commonly equipped with seahorses or cranes intertwined among cattails and arrowhead plants, or equipped with a fluted column decorated with lionheads and curling acanthus leaves.

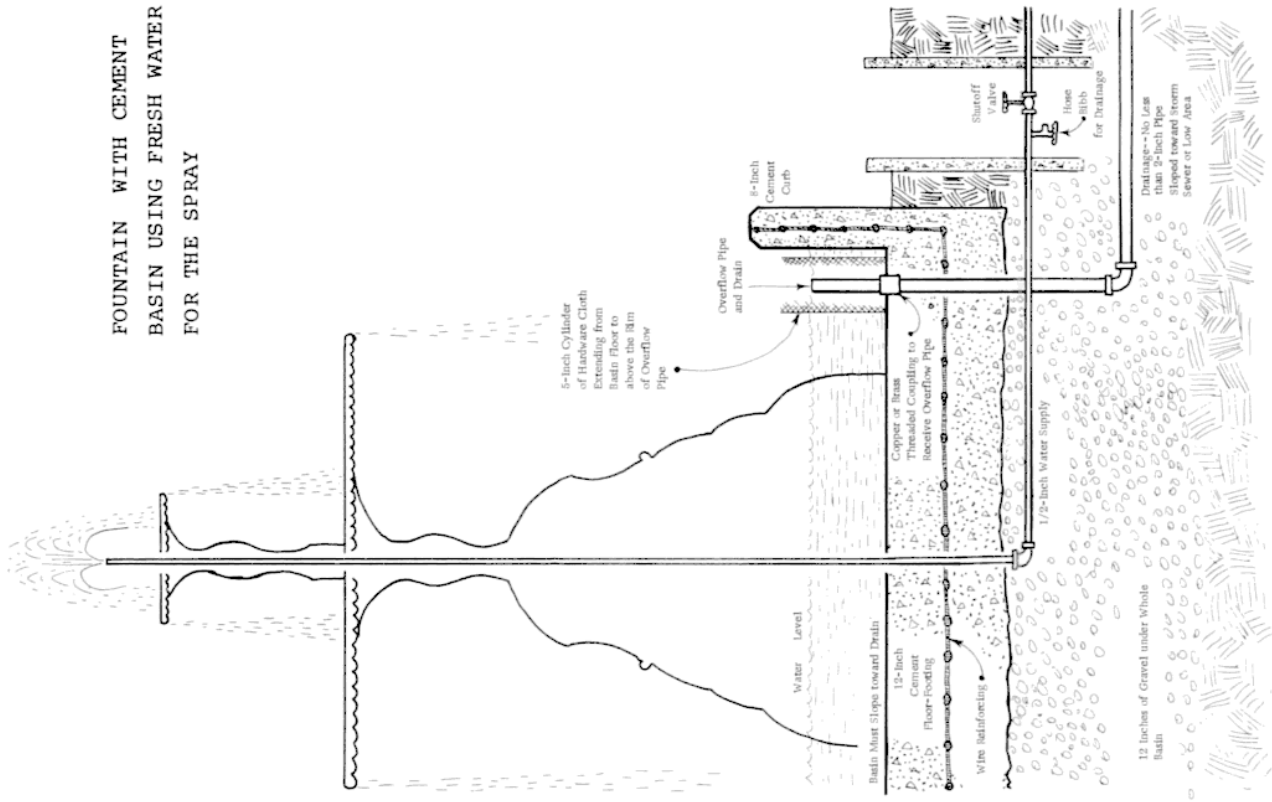
THE PEDESTALS UNDER the other spills are usually smaller and less ornate but compatible in design, and the spills themselves often have carved edges to vary the size and location of the drip with acanthus leaves spreading outward underneath from the central column. The statue (large if alone in the pool, small if on top of one or more spills) is of iron or lead depicting the Victorian imagination at its best in very interesting and detailed forms of time-honored favorites such as the boy and swan, the boy riding a dolphin, the umbrella boy, the boy with a serpent, the lady at the well, and the huge bird--all of which are usually perched on a base of extremely intriguing iron or lead rocks.

IF THE IRON FOUNTAIN does have a statue, the spray usually emerges from the mouth of the featured beast, the top of the umbrella, or the jug; a ring of sprays might also be used at the statue's feet. For those fountains lacking a statue, a ring of sprays or a single spray sometimes placed in the middle of two or three iron leaves and flowers in the top spill provides bubbling action.

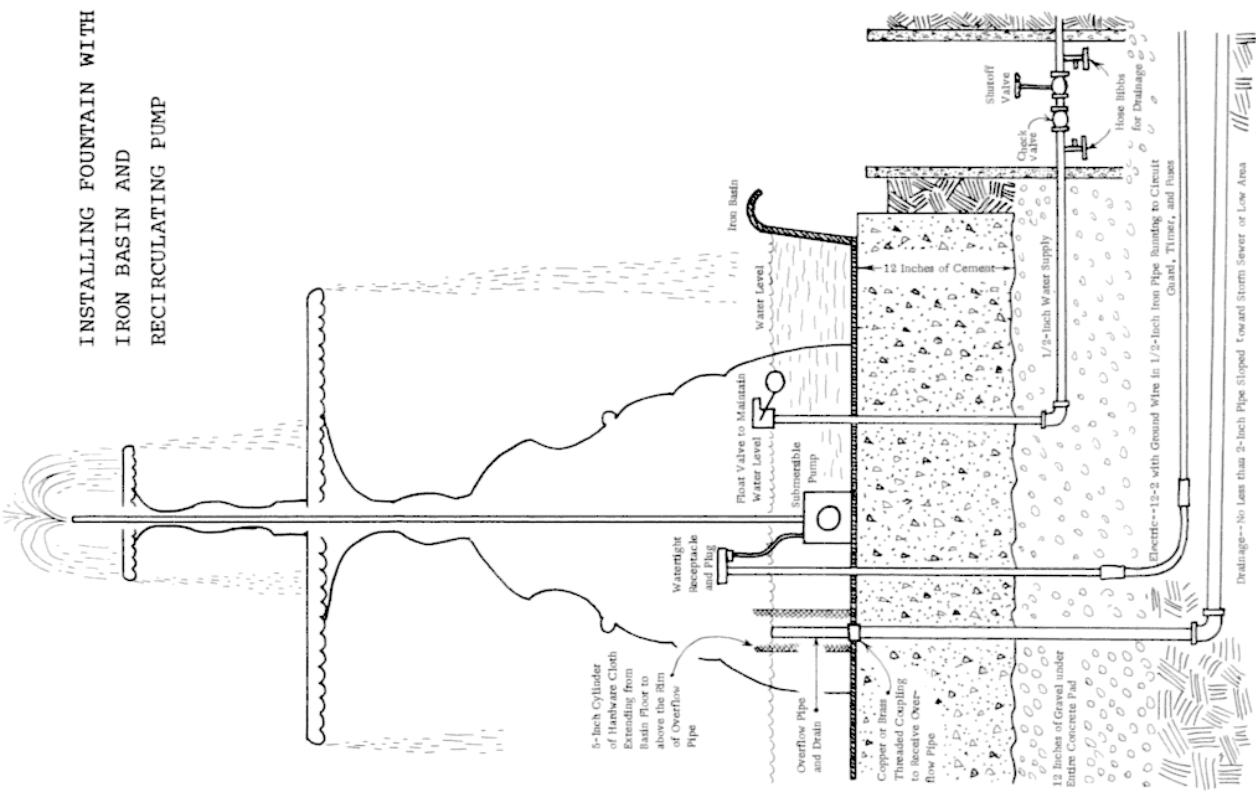
BASICALLY, THE SPRAY IS supplied by a central pipe that in reality also holds the stacked-up parts together. Then, usually under the base of these central parts out in the basin, is the overflow pipe that carries the water off so that it does not spill out over the edge of the basin. It is typical that this overflow pipe may be unscrewed from its socket in the basin floor to drain all of the water out of the basin. A valve on the supply line is often located in the yard or under the central base to turn the water on and off.

THE ACCOMPANYING DIAGRAMS show piping for using the fountain with fresh running water and for the addition of a small electric pump to recirculate the water through the fountain. Especially in the smaller basin that contains a fountain using a pump, it is important to install a float valve on the water supply to maintain the water level as the water splashes out and evaporates.

FOUNTAIN WITH CEMENT
BASIN USING FRESH WATER
FOR THE SPRAY



INSTALLING FOUNTAIN WITH
IRON BASIN AND
RECIRCULATING PUMP



IF NEW PIPING IS REQUIRED in restoring a fountain, copper or red brass piping are the most desirable. Adequate provision must be made for draining the supply piping so that winter frost damage will not occur. Regardless of the piping used, a copper or red brass fitting is a must for the socket in which the overflow pipe is screwed as these threads will quickly rust out when the overflow pipe is left out to keep the pool drained in the wintertime. And the larger the drain line, the better. It is much easier to wash out a pool where the drain is large enough to carry out small bits of debris without clogging.

IN RE-SETTING AN IRON BASIN, a level concrete pad should be built as a foundation; then, the iron basin is placed (above ground level) on this pad using a seal of wet cement beneath the basin floor to seal around pipe openings and to adhere the basin to the pad. A level should be used in checking the basin and spills at all times to avoid the one-sided or unlevel-dish effect of a leaning fountain.

DUE TO THE UNAVAILABILITY of cement and the difficulties in forming and working it, cement basins for iron fountains were not usually used unless the desired pool size and/or depth exceeded dimensions offered in iron. Larger fountains in parks often



Color scheme of dark green with white accents this unusual ramhead fountain on the lawn of the Hamill House in Georgetown, Colorado. Iron leaves and flowers ornament the spray on the top spill while small iron flowerpots adorn the edge of the basin.

have the hexagon or octagon shaped cement basin combined with an iron coping that was supplied by the manufacturer; however, the smaller residential fountains usually have a round cement basin that has a cement curb as well, when cement was substituted for the iron basin. The edges of the curb are usually simple and still can be formed by adding wooden mouldings in circular forms built with well-supported flexible sheets of wood. The author has never seen brick used originally as a coping around these basins, although several instances of sculptured sandstone coping have been evident.

IN THIS UNDERTAKING OF CEMENT WORK, it is important to follow the information given in the diagrams in order to avoid frost damage. The mixture for the cement should be no leaner than four parts sand, two parts cement, and one part gravel. After the forms are removed, the surfaces can be troweled and broomed. The finish should not be real slick as algae forming on the wet surfaces makes them as slick as smooth ice and very dangerous when cleaning the basin.

THE IRON BASINS are usually not more than 8 in. deep and are very safe for children. However, they may be used for a few goldfish in the summer and such water plants as water hyacinth (which produces beautiful purple bloom spikes) and parrot's feather. If one desires to grow waterlilies, water irises, or arrowheads in a fountain, the basin must be a large concrete one with a depth of not under 24 in. Generally, the water garden is kept to a minimum in a basin with an active fountain, as most of these plants do not like to be kept wet on top and do not like currents of rushing water around them. Also, a water garden must receive at least partial sunlight.

THE PLANTINGS AROUND THE FOUNTAIN should be compatible with water as the area is usually kept wet by the wind blowing the spray. Ivy is excellent around the basin.

MAINTENANCE OF THE IRON FOUNTAIN will require cleaning of the basin more often if re-circulated water is used. Algae (green water), which forms from the bottom of the basin will always be a problem unless fresh water is added continuously. The author has found that the only real solution to this algae is to place in the basin the oxygenating plant water-milfoil or Myriophyllum that shades the basin floor and prevents the formation of algae. The problem of mosquitos should not be evident in the fountain basin that has fresh water and fish.

WINTER AND FREEZING TEMPERATURES must bring the draining of all fountain parts and the basin (unless it is a deep one in which logs should be placed to prevent the breaking of the cement by the freezing of the water) and the covering with canvas of the spills and statue.

The second part of Tom H. Gerhardt's article on Victorian Cast Iron Fountains and Urns will appear in the July 1977 issue of The Old-House Journal. It will discuss fountains for the conservatory and give sources for garden ornament.

Preparing To Paint

By Clem Labine

FEW PEOPLE REALIZE that, in painting, the actual application of paint is the easiest—and in many ways the least important—part of a paint job. Proper surface preparation is EVERYTHING. In old houses, you can easily spend 4-8 hours or more in preparation for every hour that will be spent actually painting.

BEFORE PLUNGING into preparation for painting, however, ask yourself the basic question: Is repainting really needed? Or will just a thorough cleaning (and maybe some touch-up) suffice? Too often, people lay on a new coat of paint rather than cleaning. But repainting year after year has two serious drawbacks: (1) Thick paint layers blur detail in woodwork and ornamental plaster; (2) Heavy paint layers create lumpy surfaces and increase the likelihood of alligatoring and other paint problems.

A CLEANING SOLUTION of Soilax (or similar non-rinse soap powder) can provide an amazing rejuvenation of old paint. And since old painted work should be washed free of dirt and grime before repainting anyway, you can delay a final decision until the cleaning step is completed.

IF THERE IS WALLPAPER on the wall—painted or unpainted—you're best advised to strip it off. Wallpaper that is tightly bonded to the wall can be painted—but it doesn't look as good as paint on flat plaster. Also, the paper can always come loose at a later date—ruining the whole paint job. (See The Journal, Sept. 1975, p. 10, for tips on removing wallpaper.)

The Calcimine Factor

BEFORE 1940, calcimine paint was widely used on ceilings (and sometimes walls) to avoid problems of paint build-up. Calcimine—essentially a tinted chalk in a weak glue—was meant to be washed off before a new coating was applied. That way, you always had only a single layer of paint on top of your plasterwork, and all outlines were crisp and sharp.

WHEN OIL-BASED PAINTS began to replace calcimine, often these new paints were applied right on top of the old calcimine. This was a mistake. Over the years, the glue that holds the calcimine to the plaster weakens... and as it peels it takes all the other paint layers with it.

THERE ARE ONLY TWO WAYS to deal with chronic peeling caused by old calcimine:

- (1) Allow the surface to continue peeling and touch it up periodically;
- (2) Remove the calcimine and covering paint layers. Calcimine dissolves in water—but you'll have to use heat or chemicals to remove the water-impervious paint on top of the calcimine. Or use the steam process described in The Journal, May 1976, page 2.

IF YOU HAVE A SURFACE that is still covered with its original calcimine (you can tell by its solubility in hot water), be sure to wash it ALL off before painting. (The May 1976 article has tips on washing calcimine.)

Beware Of Alligators

THE MOST FRUSTRATING of paint problems is alligatoring—an over-all series of cracks in the old paint film. The cracks originate not in the plaster or woodwork below, but rather somewhere in the layers of paint on top. One common cause is applying a flat paint over varnish or glossy enamel.

ONCE ALLIGATORING is occurring, you can do only one of two things:

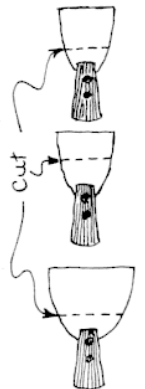
1. Treat the problem symptomatically by filling the cracks with spackle or joint compound. Recognize, however, that the alligatoring will probably show up again within a year;
2. Remove all the paint layers with a heat gun or chemicals and start all over again.

IF YOU ARE EVER painting over varnish or a glossy enamel, prevent future alligatoring by sanding thoroughly, or use a liquid deglosser.

Elbow Grease Needed

AFTER WASHING (and having determined to repaint), the next step is to thoroughly scrape all loose and flaking paint. This is a boring—but essential—part of the job. Proper scraping not only removes blemishes and loose material; it also calls your attention to cracks and loose plaster that will need more work.

IT'S AMAZING what a difference the proper scraper makes. Although there are many types on the market, most professional painters find that the best scraper is a homemade "short scraper." They take a good quality flexible scraper (such as a Russell or Warner) and have it cut down as per the sketches at the right. Best way to cut them is at a metal shop that has a sheet metal cutter. In a pinch, you could cut one with a hacksaw and straighten the edge with a grinding wheel or file. A file



is used during scraping to sharpen the scraper should it become dull. Professional painters usually have a number of short scrapers—cut to different lengths from different width blades. For the homeowner, a good all-purpose scraper can be made from a 4" flexible scraper cut so that about 2" of blade remains.



PROPER LIGHT is a great asset in the scraping and subsequent patching operations. Best way to get this is with an extension light fitted with a reflector. Hold the lamp in one hand and the scraper in the other. You'll be astounded at the imperfections that show up in the glare of your hand-held lamp that aren't noticeable in ordinary lighting conditions.

Loose Plaster

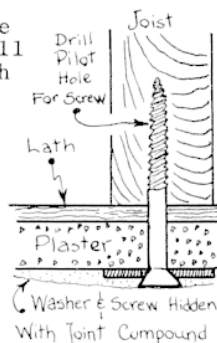
FTEN THE SCRAPING will turn up areas of loose plaster in walls or ceilings. In severe cases, the only solution is to remove all the old loose material and replaster or replace with sheetrock. But if the problem is localized, there are a couple of short-cut repairs.

PLASTER OF PARIS can be used to make a "key" to anchor the old plaster. Cut away the heart of the loose material, exposing the lath. Make sure that the lath is firmly attached to the studs. After thoroughly wetting the lath and surrounding plaster, trowel in a stiff mixture of plaster of paris—making sure that some of it oozes behind the lath strips. Trowel the plaster of paris firmly against the old plaster to obtain a good bond.

RUN A BOARD across the patch to make sure that none of the new wet plaster is higher than the surrounding surface. Much better too low than too high. Low spots can be filled in later with spackle or joint compound. If any plaster of paris gets on adjoining painted surfaces, sponge it off while wet—or else remove it after it is dry with your short scraper and coarse steel wool. Plaster does not adhere well to painted surfaces, so if you don't remove this slopover before painting, you run the risk of chipping at a later date.

BEWARE ESPECIALLY of ceilings that seem spongy to the touch. Lath nails can work loose from old dried joists. Or the plaster keys may have broken loose from the lath. In either case, loose plaster in a ceiling is just an accident (possibly fatal) waiting to happen.

IF INSPECTION SHOWS the lath are still secure to the joists, small loose areas can be repaired with plaster of paris keys as described above. If the lath is loose—or the area involved is several square feet—you can drill through the plaster with carbide bits, and secure the plaster with 2" washers held by 3" wood screws driven into the joists. The washers can be camouflaged by feathering out with several applica-



tions of joint compound. These anchors should be placed at about 18" intervals throughout the loose area.

Joint Compound: The Magic Material

TO BRING OLD PLASTER SURFACES up to snuff for painting, many professionals rely heavily on joint compound (also called "wallboard compound," "taping cement," etc.) They use this in preference to commercial spackle. The advantages of joint compound: It has good adhesive properties (it will stick to paint); works smoothly and can be easily sanded when dry. The premixed joint compound, although more expensive than the powdered form, has better working properties and is worth the added cost.

JOINT COMPOUND is excellent for leveling imperfections in walls or ceilings...such as places where old paint has chipped out, cracks caused by alligatoring, etc. Used in conjunction with joint tape, it's also useful in covering structural cracks. When professional painters are preparing an old room that's in bad shape, very often every square inch will be gone over with a thin layer (or layers) of joint compound to even out all irregularities.

ONE DISADVANTAGE of joint compound is that it shrinks on drying. Thus if any build-up more than 1/32" is required, you should put the material on in several applications. Each coat should dry thoroughly before the next one is applied. Try to get the bulk of the material put on in the first application—and smooth it out as much as possible without fussing excessively. The subsequent coats...applied thin...will complete the smoothing of the patch.

THE WIDER THE AREA being worked, the wider the taping knife you should use. Some professionals have taping knives as wide as 12". For the homeowner, however, a 3", 5" and 6" knife should handle 99% of the situations you'll encounter.

AFTER THE JOINT COMPOUND dries, it can be smoothed by sandpaper or "wet sanding" with a damp sponge. If you've worked carefully with the taping knife, however, the need for sanding should be minimal.

JOINT COMPOUND is highly absorptive of paint. Therefore, before the finish coat of paint is applied, all patches—both raw plaster and joint compound areas—should receive a coat of primer. The primer should be tinted the same color—or slightly darker—than the finish paint that will be used.

NEXT MONTH: The Best Way To Handle Cracks

SPECIAL THANKS for technical advice to Howard Zucker—a member for 31 years of the Brotherhood of Painters and Decorators.

Products For The Old House

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BECAUSE both editors and readers of The Journal have often bemoaned the lack of truly Victorian wallpapers today, we are especially pleased to discover this source for authentic and beautiful Victorian fabric and wallpaper.

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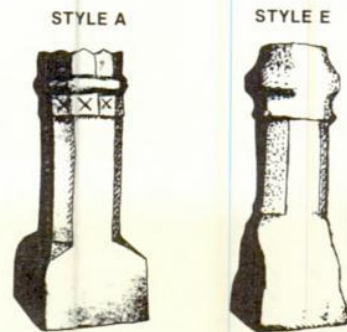


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