

**REPAINTING YOUR HISTORIC PROPERTY**

*The L'Enfant Trust*

Voluntary Preservation  
through Conservation Easements.  
Washington, D.C.



**A**s part of its mission, *The L'Enfant Trust is committed to helping owners of properties protected by its easements maintain the historic integrity of their buildings.*

Exterior finishes are a major feature of a building, serving to articulate its architectural elements and convey the relative importance of different spaces within it. Donors frequently ask,

“How can I select appropriate colors for repainting the exterior of my historic building?”

The following sections offer helpful guidelines in the paint selection process. They describe when to paint and when not to paint, paint colors appropriate to different eras, the number of paint colors to use, and where to apply them.

As an owner of a building protected by conservation easement, you are required to submit paint color chips to the Trust for approval prior to repainting. Under the terms of the easement, The L'Enfant Trust reserves the right to grant final approval on changes in paint colors or schemes.



## Caring for Historic Exteriors

Wood frame historic buildings must be painted to protect the wood from deterioration caused by fluctuating moisture and temperature. If paint on a wood building is showing signs of failure, it should be repainted to protect its underlying structure.

Unpainted masonry structures, including brick and stone, should not be painted.

If, however, a masonry building is already painted, leaving it painted is often the correct choice particularly if the building has been painted for most of its life. Paint may have been used to protect underlying aging materials or to cover infill materials of a different color. The removal of paint from an historic facade, whether in preparation to repaint or to expose the underlying masonry, should only occur where paint can be easily removed without damaging the underlying surface. A competent painting company familiar with historic facades should be consulted.

Use of high-quality paints and careful preparation of surfaces prior to their application will ensure the long life of an exterior finish.



## Identifying Exterior Areas for Painting

Consider the following exterior areas when selecting a paint color scheme: body, trim, sash and doors, and accent areas. Body color is used on the main sheathing material of the building. Trim color is used on decorative woodwork such as the cornice. Sash and door color is used only on the movable parts of windows and doors. Accent color is sometimes appropriate for unique detailing such as brackets and porch balusters.





## ✦ Planning a Paint Color Scheme

Avoid using too many colors on a structure which can result in visual confusion; **aim for three or fewer.**

**Generally, use only one color for the body.** If the body of a building features two different sheathing materials, it is possible to use two different body colors to distinguish these exterior areas.

**Generally, use only one trim color** for all decorative woodwork such as gables, exposed structures, cornices, corner boards, and porches.



**Use a sash and door color** which is darker than the trim color to cause these openings in the building to recede. Use a sash and door color lighter than the trim color to cause these openings to project.

*Exterior finishes are a major feature of a building, serving to articulate its architectural elements.*

**An accent color may be used for unique detailing** which is part of the decorative woodwork such as frieze panels and porch balusters. These features may be painted with a second trim color or the body color. The accent color should be applied consistently to all similar detailing throughout the structure and used with restraint.

The body color will dominate the structure. **Aim to choose a muted tone for the body color** and reserve brighter colors for the trim, sash and door, and accent areas.

**To avoid highlighting functional elements such as gutters and downspouts paint them with the body color.**

## ✦ Original Historic Paint Colors

Evidence suggests that prior to the American Revolution, building owners used strong and bright paint colors including reds, oranges, and vivid greens. Following the Revolution, as the young country rejected colonial architecture in favor of Greek Revival style for its association with democratic ideals, a shift from using bright colors to whites occurred.

In the years leading to the Civil War, painters mixed paint at or near a job site and created colors from materials available locally. To keep cost and maintenance low, building owners frequently chose a white for the main body color and a dark trim color.



Following the Civil War, companies began manufacturing ready-mixed paint, and it became available wherever the railroad could take it. Popular pattern books for home construction and color paint brochures were widely distributed. Consequently, more building owners were selecting paints from a greater color palette.

Andrew Jackson Downing's book, Cottage Residences, popularized Romantic-style houses echoing the picturesque movement in landscape and architecture. The houses Downing advocated used colors harmonious in nature: neutrals, soil, stone, and grays, rather than the stark white with green trim scheme.

During the Victorian era, balloon frame construction replaced heavy-timber framing, freeing houses from their traditional box shape. Industrialization allowed various house components to be mass-produced and shipped resulting in extravagant use of complex shapes and elaborate detailing. During this time, paint companies capitalized on a rising interest in and study of color theory. They created palettes and distributed brochures suggesting innovative uses of contrasting colors, generally darker ones, on this multi-faceted architecture.

## ✦ Historic Color Suggestions from BENJAMIN MOORE PAINTS™

Era	PRE-CIVIL WAR			VICTORIAN			20TH CENTURY		
Style	Colonial	Gothic Revival	Italianate	Second Empire	Queen Anne	Richardsonian Romanesque	Colonial Revival	Prairie	Craftsman
<b>Base Color</b>	Hodley Red HC-65	Alexandria Beige HC-77	Boothbay Gray HC-165	Louisburg Green HC-113	Greenfield Pumpkin HC-40	Stone surface	Hawthorne Yellow HC-4	Old Salem Gray HC-94	Ashley Grey HC-87
<b>Trim Color</b>	Black INT RM	Clinton Brown HC-67	Garrison Red HC-66	Monterey White HC-27	Caldwell Green HC-124	Van Buren Brown HC-70	Brilliant White EXT RM	Richmond Gray HC-96	Feather Down OC-6
<b>Door Color</b>	Black INT RM	Lancaster Whitewash HC-174	Duxbury Gray HC-163	Tate Olive HC-112	Richmond Gold HC-41	Van Buren Brown HC-70	Summerdale Gold HC-17	Lafayette Green HC-135	Fairview Taupe HC-85

To view these colors you may visit the BENJAMIN MOORE PAINTS™ website at [www.benjaminmoore.com](http://www.benjaminmoore.com)



*...it is easy to find a color that reflects your personal style while still maintaining a connection to the building's historic past.*

## Choosing Historic Colors Today

**All building owners have color preferences. The L'Enfant Trust can help you find ways to incorporate your tastes into an appropriate color scheme for your building while fulfilling your easement obligation.** With the array of paint colors available today, it is easy to find a color that reflects your personal style while still maintaining a connection to the building's historic past.

Author John Crosby Freeman suggests that historical paint colors work well when they emulate traditional and local building materials and pigments. For example, browns, grays, and reds evoke wood, stone, and brick, respectively. Ochres (orange-yellow) and iron oxide colors (reddish-brown) lend themselves to a huge array of choices.

If your taste demands use of less traditional color, consider a scheme that incorporates that color sparingly, such as on shutters or accent areas. Like too much make-up, an overly intense color or too many colors may mar natural beauty or require costly maintenance.

Remember that the colors you select impact your neighbors, your street, your historic district and your community. Express your tastes but defer to your building's history. Allow your property to relate its architectural or historical significance through careful selection and application of paint.



## Resources

Bock, Gordon, "Colorful Issues in Choosing Exterior Paint," *Old House Journal*. March – April 2001.

Maycock, Susan E. and Sarah J. Zimmerman, *Painting Historic Exteriors: Colors, Application, and Regulation*. Cambridge Historical Commission, 2002.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984.

Moss, Roger W., ed. *Paint in America: The Colors of Historic Buildings*. The Preservation Press, 1994.

Moss, Roger W. and Gail Caskey Winkler, *Victorian Exterior Decoration: How to Paint Your Nineteenth-Century American House Historically*. Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1987.










National Park Service Preservation Brief 10: Exterior paint Problems on Historic Woodwork. (<http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief10.htm>)

Poppelier, John C., *What Style is it? A Guide to American Architecture*. The Preservation Press, 1983.

U.S. General Services Administration, Historic Preservation Technical Procedures, *Guidelines for Identifying Historic Paint Colors*.



## Identifying Architectural Style

Era	PRE-CIVIL WAR			VICTORIAN			20TH CENTURY		
Style	Colonial	Gothic Revival	Italianate	Second Empire	Queen Anne	Richardsonian Romanesque	Colonial Revival	Prairie	Craftsman
Illustration or drawing									
Historic Districts: Where to look in Washington	Capitol Hill Georgetown	LeDroit Park	Anacostia Capitol Hill LeDroit Park Mount Pleasant Mount Vernon Square Sixteenth Street Strivers' Section	Dupont Circle LeDroit Park Logan Circle Shaw Strivers' Section	Anacostia Capitol Hill Cleveland Park Dupont Circle Greater Fourteenth Street Georgetown Massachusetts Avenue Mount Vernon Square Sheridan-Kalorama Sixteenth Street Takoma Park Greater U Street Woodley Park	Capitol Hill Dupont Circle Greater Fourteenth Street Georgetown Logan Circle Massachusetts Avenue Shaw Sheridan-Kalorama Sixteenth Street Strivers' Section	Cleveland Park Dupont Circle Georgetown Kalorama Triangle Massachusetts Avenue Mount Pleasant Sheridan-Kalorama Sixteenth Street Takoma Park Woodley Park	Cleveland Park	Capitol Hill Kalorama Triangle Sheridan-Kalorama
Prominent Features of Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• symmetry</li> <li>• rows of windows (1)</li> <li>• door with elaborate crown (2)</li> <li>• decorative cornice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• steeply-pitched roof (3)</li> <li>• decorated gables</li> <li>• pointed arch windows (4)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• inspired by Italian-style villas</li> <li>• low-pitched roof</li> <li>• elaborate cornice (5)</li> <li>• tall, narrow windows and doors with elaborate crown or surround (6)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dormer windows (7)</li> <li>• cupola or tower (8)</li> <li>• Mansard roof (9)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• steeply-pitched roof of irregular shape</li> <li>• projections such as bay windows, turret (10), overhangs, porches (11)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• wide, round-topped arches over doors, windows, porches (12)</li> <li>• thick masonry walls, stonework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• accentuated front door with decorative pediment or fanlights (13)</li> <li>• prominent cornice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• eaves, cornice, facade emphasize horizontal nature of building (14)</li> <li>• low-pitched roof (15)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• open and exposed roof eaves and rafters (16)</li> <li>• decorative beams or braces under gables (17)</li> </ul>