

Color

The primary purpose of paint is to prevent moisture penetration, and paint is one of the least expensive ways to maintain a building's historic fabric. Paint color also helps give the building its identity, and a good color scheme accents a building's features. A Certificate of Appropriateness is required to change the color of any structure in the District.

Paint colors changed with advances in technology. During the Colonial period, the District's structures were unpainted or painted in colors derived from natural sources, and the color palette was limited to reds, browns and yellows. Most buildings were monochromatic, and a contrasting color was painted only on elements that moved, the doors and window sash. During the early nineteenth century ground white lead pigment became less costly, and the arrival of Greek Revival architecture dictated that houses should be painted white in imitation of marble. Greek Revival houses were also monochromatic, and the window sash was typically painted black. Many earlier homes were painted white during this period, contributing to the popular belief that New England houses have always been painted white.

In the mid nineteenth century earth tones made their appearance. Buildings designed in the Gothic Revival, Italianate, and Second Empire styles were often painted in shades of gray, yellow, and tan, as well as red and brown. After 1870 noticeably darker colors, including greens, dark reds and orange were introduced. Distinction between the trim and body of the building was made, and the trim was often painted a darker color that complimented the lighter color of the house. The palette for structures during this era sometimes incorporated three or more colors, using contrasting colors to highlight decorative details. After 1900, painters moved away from the previous era's vitality and chose simple, lighter colors such as cream, yellow and white, to complement the simple forms of the buildings.

Paint weathers by chalking, peeling and alligatoring, and requires regular renewal. Painted elements should be repainted every five to eight years or as needed. Accumulated paint layers should be removed prior to repainting, using the gentlest means possible. Hand scraping and hand sanding is the preferred method of paint removal. Chemical removal can produce excellent results, but extreme care must be taken with the products, and the process can be expensive. Rotary sanders that may damage wood and the use of heat guns, which can result in fire, are strongly discouraged.

Buildings built before 1978 almost always have lead based paint. Care should be taken when removing lead based paint. Protective clothing and masks are recommended, and the collection of lead based scrapings prevents soil contamination.

Recommendations

- Paint color, appropriate for the structure's age and architectural style, is recommended. Original paint color can sometimes be determined by scraping underneath clapboards or in corners where paint has built up.
- Avoid painting surfaces that have never been painted. Unpainted stone lintels, sills, and foundations should remain unpainted.
- Most paint manufacturers have created a palette of historic colors based on their research. The use of a high-quality paint and instructions for preparation and application are recommended.