

Porches

Porches were designed as functioning elements of the house. They provided an outdoor room for socializing with the family and neighbors. Life was different from today. There was socialization with the neighbors along the street and between the street and the porch. Main entrances were covered with porches, porticos and other pronounced architectural forms. These were historically raised a few steps above the grade of the property and were a prominent visual feature from the street elevation of the building. In many cases porches were energy saving features providing shading on southern and western exposures in summer months. Aesthetically, porches are significant architectural elements that define the character of the home.



Common Issues:

Porches are outdoor elements that sustain heavy wear and weathering. They are often in need of general if not extensive maintenance. Maintenance measures can result in loss of character if not undertaken carefully and sensitively, resulting in loss of railing components, skirting or complete removal of lower portions of the porch.

Homeowners and contractors should retain all original portions of the porch elements which still exist. Porches should not be enclosed as doing so will change the character and the function of the porch.

If a porch enclosure is constructed, it should be done sensitively to preserve the 'open' feeling of the original porch, and in a manner that is removable without damaging or removing the original features of the porch.

Maintenance:

- Regularly check your porch for loose and missing elements such as balusters, trim, planking, skirting or trellis. Secure all loose pieces.
- Keep your porch clean, do not allow leaves and other debris to build up and trap moisture.
- Your porch is not a storage room. Keep a comfortable but limited amount of furnishings on your porch.
- Keep porch components painted, re-applying paint to the porch on an annual basis if needed.
- Clean the gutters and downspouts of your porch roof at least twice a year.
- Repair small areas of rot as soon as they are found with a wood epoxy and consolidants.

Repairs:

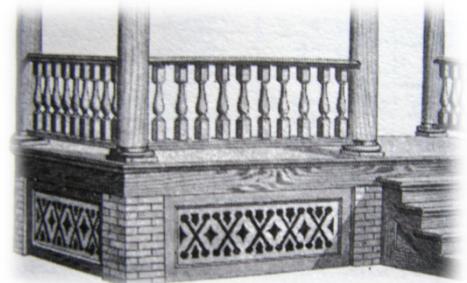
Porch components should be repaired rather than replaced whenever possible. Replace only the rotted or damaged elements rather than all elements. In some cases new pieces will need to be milled to match the original pieces that have rotted beyond re-use. Remove unsympathetic replacements that have occurred over the life of the porch. Remove vinyl and aluminum sidings. When materials must be replaced, replace them with like materials. Do not change original metal railings to wood or original wood railings to metal. Remove any indoor/outdoor carpeting from the porch; this material holds snow and moisture in place and allows the wood components to rot.

Do-it-Yourself-ers:

Have masonry piers repaired by a qualified mason who is knowledgeable about historic buildings. Matching brick and especially matching mortar can be tricky. Masonry piers are structural elements and cracked piers or piers with deteriorating mortar should not be left unattended.

When balusters are rotted and in need of repair, remove one of the balusters that is in good condition and take it to a full service lumberyard, millwork/cabinetry shop to have it duplicated for replacement of the rotted units. Make sure to use a primer on new wood and include a drainage hole in the bottom rail beneath each baluster to future rot.

Historic porch railings are typically much lower than contemporary railings, only about 24 – 30" high. If the entire railing absolutely must be replaced due to extensive damages new codes could apply raising the railing to 36" for porch floors that are more than 30" above the ground. To preserve the character of your historic home, document original railing heights and present your documentation to your building official for exception or appeals to newer building codes. Resources for historic photos of your home include museums, public libraries, local archives, assessing records, or the local historical society.



Tongue and Groove porch floor boards were common on historic homes. If they must be replaced, use treated wood, cedar or redwood that are all inherently rot resistant. The tongue and groove configuration requires a slight slope on the porch to drain water. The boards typically run perpendicular to the body of the house.

All wood materials within 8" of the ground should be treated, cedar or redwood as well. Decision of repair or replacement should be done with the assistance of professionals experienced in historic home restoration. If replacement is necessary the new components should match the original appearance as closely as possible.

All portions of the wood porch should be kept well painted. The floor surface may require annual painting while the remainder may require re-paint every few years to keep joints in woodwork protected. High performance paint can greatly extend the life of the paint. Add a small amount of sand to the freshly painted steps to give them traction.

Regular Maintenance Should Include:

Porches should be observed on a regular basis. Twice a year conduct gutter maintenance and inspect the porch roof. Review flashings where the porch roof abuts flat walls or other roofs and look for open seams, and loose conditions. Roofs generally need replacement every 15 - 20 years. Inspect the wooden portions of the porch. Look for broken, missing, or rotted pieces. Review conditions from within the crawl spaces beneath the porch, look for wet areas, evidence of vermin burrowing, foundation deterioration, or rotted wood. Ensure that the ground is sloping away from the house without ponding water near the foundation. Inspect above ground masonry piers, record any cracks or damages to the piers. Keep your record of observations in a log book. Address any issues promptly, do not wait for the problems to occur, and contact a qualified professional. Make additional observations after storms and upon the first heavy freeze of winter.

Keep the porch free of debris and paint the floor surface on an annual basis; paint entire porch every few years.



Article Resources

- *Department of the Interior Preservation Brief 45*
- *Civic Park Home Preservation Manual*, THA Architects. 1981
- *The Preservation of Historic Architecture, The U.S. Government's Official guidelines for Preserving historic Homes.* Department of the Interior. 2004

Additional Resources

National Park Service ITS No. 9.

This guide prepared by H2A Architects Inc. 2017

Porches: Secretary of Interior Standards for Historic Preservation

Recommended

- Preserve the original features.
- Retain the existing material whenever possible.
- Replace components only where necessary, use new material that duplicates old as closely as possible.
- Protect and maintain the porch by cleaning gutters and downspouts.
- Protect wood with regular painting.
- Execute repairs immediately while damage is still minimal.