

# Paint and Exterior Color



St. Joseph Landmark Commission

Preservation of most historic wood and metal surfaces requires the presence of a sound paint film to protect against direct exposure to the elements. Water, wind, and ultraviolet light can severely weaken exposed wood fibers over time resulting in their eventual destruction and can contribute to the corrosion of certain exposed metal surfaces. Paint, in addition to its protective role, also provides an opportunity to highlight a building's architectural features by its placement and can help to reinforce a structure's architectural style through the appropriate selection of color.

## Maintenance and Repair

Paint films on wooden and metal surfaces should be routinely cleaned to prevent dirt build-up. Often the washing of painted surfaces with water and a mild detergent will eliminate the surface dirt film and restore the paint to its initial luster. Repainting, however, is necessary when the paint film has been broken and peeling occurs.

The key to a successful paint job lies in the surface preparation. All loose or flaking paint should be removed down to the first sound paint layer. The removal should be accomplished with the gentlest means possible. Scraping and sanding by hand are the preferred methods of removal. Electric heat plates, hot air guns, and chemical strippers may be used if the gentler means prove ineffective. (Note: Chemical strippers may require the washing of the wood surface with vinegar and water or other mixture to neutralize any residue left on the wood.) Under no circumstances should sandblasting, high-pressure water-blasting, or propane or butane torches be used on wooden surfaces as they will cause permanent damage by raising the wood grain or scorching.

Following the removal of loose paint, it is important to "featheredge" the remaining paint where it meets a lower surface (such as bare wood) by sanding into the edges. This will ensure the smoothest appearance for the final paint job. Any damaged or deteriorated carpentry or metalwork should then be repaired or replaced. Nail heads, holes, cracks, and other voids in the wood surface should also be repaired with an appropriate filler at this time. This should be followed by the washing of the surface with a mild detergent and water to remove any accumulated dirt, chalking, and deteriorated paint. Rinse the surface well and allow it to dry thoroughly before repainting.



Multi-color paint schemes highlight architectural details on these two Victorian porches.



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Bare or scraped wood that will be prone to exposure or standing water can gain from being treated with a water repellent or preservative before priming. Repellants block the penetration of water, particularly into end grains and joints, and so limit the movement of the wood. Care must be taken to adequately dry the surface before priming. Make sure the water repellent is compatible with the base primer.

Primers are base coatings between the surface material and topcoat intended to improve the paintability of the surface and provide better adhesion. Primers should be applied to a clean and dry surface. End priming woodwork and back-priming new boards prior to installation will help to ensure the longevity of the paint job. Oil-based primers are recommended for weathered wood or chalking paint surfaces. Primers especially formulated for metal should be used for metal surfaces. The primer should always be compatible with the topcoat. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for the recommended application.



Caulking of inside and outside corners, vertical joints, and seams is best accomplished after the primer application. Caulk is more apt to adhere to a surface that has been primed than to bare wood or metal. The use of caulk will help to seal gaps and keep the wood dry or prevent rust from forming on metal surfaces. The caulking of horizontal seams

A fresh coat of paint transforms this 610 N. 7<sup>th</sup> Street residence, Hall Street Historic District, following removal of asphalt siding and repairs to the original wood siding. Proper pre-work is crucial to maintaining a long-lasting paint finish.

on clapboard-sided structures is generally not recommended. Frame houses need a degree of “breathability” to ensure a long-lasting paint surface. Horizontal clapboard joints also allow water/moisture to escape if it enters the wall cavity, thus preventing costly structural damage to framing members.

Once preparation work has been completed, the topcoat may be applied. Following the manufacturer's instructions is important to ensure maximum paint endurance. Generally, topcoats should be applied as soon as the primer is dry (allow 48 hours for most oil-based products). One coat of oil-based topcoat is normally sufficient over paint that is still holding up well. A two-coat application is standard for newly primed bare wood and metal. Avoid painting in cold (under 50 degrees Fahrenheit) or damp conditions and allow for adequate drying time between coats. Choose a quality paint to ensure the best finish possible.

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Painted metal surfaces require similar preparation procedures before repainting. It is crucial that all corrosion be removed and a metal primer coat be applied immediately to protect the surface from further corrosion. See guidelines for ARCHITECTURAL METALS for additional information on cleaning and pre-paint preparation.

Select paint colors that accentuate the building's architectural details and harmonize with surrounding properties. Much literature exists today regarding historically appropriate color selections for buildings of different styles and periods. For example, Greek Revival houses were typically painted white or "egg shell" white and their shutters dark green or black; the Gothic Revival and Italianate styles used "earth tone" colors such as tans, grays, and buffs. Buildings in the Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles exhibited paint schemes in shades of green, red, and brown. Many of these elaborate Victorian houses often had multi-color or polychromatic color schemes, a paint technique that has seen renewed interest in recent years. The Colonial Revival style, which gained favor around 1900 and the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, returned to the white, off-white, and buff color family. Post-Victorian structures such as the Bungalow and American Foursquare often combined "earth tone" neutral colors with natural brick and stone.

Despite the desire to achieve authenticity in an exterior color scheme, the Landmark Commission does recognize that paint is a reversible treatment and is a personal, subjective, aesthetic decision. Therefore, the Landmark Commission will not legislate paint color choices. Instead, it is available for color consultations. The Commission, however, does reserve the right to dictate color choices when said colors are an inherent part of the material and are deemed important character-defining features of an historic resource (e.g. a gray slate roof). The Commission may also require the painting of certain building components such as metal gutters and storm windows that are typically manufactured with a mill finish.

## Paint and Exterior Color: Guidelines

1. Maintain a sound paint film on surfaces to be painted so as to preserve historic building fabric.
2. Undertake a routine program of maintenance to protect painted surfaces and pre-paint preparation to ensure a lasting paint finish:
  - Routinely clean painted surfaces with water and a mild detergent to prevent dirt build-up. (Note: Household bleach in small quantities may be added to the mixture to remove mildew from the surface.
  - Remove all loose or flaking paint down to the first sound paint layer as the first step in pre-painting preparation. Use the gentlest means possible to accomplish this such as scraping and sanding by hand on wood surfaces and wire brushing and sanding by hand on metal surfaces. Employ electric heat guns, heat plates, and chemical strippers only when gentler means prove unsuccessful. Use these tools with caution to avoid injury to life and damage to property.



Painters apply a primer coat to the Jesse James House during its restoration in Patee Town. (Courtesy: St. Joseph Department of Planning & Community Services)

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## Paint and Exterior Color: Guidelines continued

- Use water repellants or preservatives on bare wood surfaces prone to standing water or harsh weather exposure before priming and repainting.
  - Prime all exposed wooden and metal surfaces. Prime the back of new wood and the end grain of boards to increase the longevity of the paint job.
  - Caulk all seams and joints (excluding the horizontal joints of clapboard) to keep the wood dry. Use appropriate wood or metal fillers to fill nail heads, holes, and cracks in the surface.
  - Apply new paint only to clean dry surfaces.
  - Follow the manufacturer's instructions for proper surface preparation and repainting.
  - Use high quality paints to achieve the most lasting paint finish.
3. Avoid painting previously unpainted surfaces such as brick, stone, copper, or bronze. The painting of brick surfaces may be permissible if inappropriate patching and repairs have been made over time and the visual integrity of the surface has been compromised or if the painting achieves a more desirable aesthetic effect. This may be particularly true for non-contributing buildings.
  4. Coat replacement gutters and downspouts with paint or a baked enamel finish in a color appropriate to the color scheme of the house, unless they are made of copper.
  5. Coat exterior storm windows with paint or a baked enamel finish in a color appropriate to the color scheme of the house.
  6. Select paint colors that accentuate a building's detailing and architectural style and harmonize with surrounding properties.
  7. Employ paint analysis techniques such as microscopic investigation to determine historic paint schemes and finish techniques.
  8. Consider the use of exterior stains in lieu of paint for certain surfaces. Such products may be appropriate for porch floors, decks, and other areas.