

Color in History

1820-1850. Springboro’s earliest houses are plain masonry structures reflecting the simplicity of the town’s Quaker founders. Masonry houses do not have to be painted and probably were left unpainted until the late 1800’s when it was believed that paint was necessary to waterproof the brick or update the appearance of the house. These simple structures need no more than a basic color for the body and a complimentary color for trim. White, gray, cream, pale yellow or other light colors were popular from 1820 to 1850. Shutters and blinds were painted black or dark green or stained in a wood color. Window frames, bars and muntins were probably painted the same dark color.

Late 1800s. During the Victorian period, houses became more ornate and decorated with elaborate trim. Houses were painted in darker colors. Main body colors consisted of deeper earth tones, including brick red, dark terra cotta, brown, deep sage, and olive green. Sometimes two or three or more colors were used to highlight architectural details.

Early 1900s. The Colonial and Classical Revival era at the turn of the century saw a return to white, light yellow, tan, and medium gray, with trim painted in similar pale colors. The somber shades of the Victorian era were obliterated with gallons of white paint. The Craftsman Bungalow style of the 1920s and 1930s, rare in Springboro, returned to natural materials and colors. Medium earth tones, such as gray, beige, or light brown, and even brick red were used to highlight the low-slung appearance of the style and accent important details such as exposed rafters and banks of windows.

Historic Paint Colors
1820-1860 White, light gray, cream, pale yellow, other light natural colors. Shutters and window frames were painted black or dark green or stained a wood color.
1860-1890 Deep earth tones, including brick red, dark terra cotta, brown, deep sage, and olive. Multi-colored schemes used to articulate and highlight detail, with projecting elements painted lighter and recessed elements darker shades of the main body color.
1900-1915 White, light yellow, tans, and medium gray, with the trim painted in complimentary pale colors.
1915-1930 Natural materials and nature’s colors, such as medium earth tones, beige, gray, and light brown; occasionally darker shades for trim detail.

Color Choice and Placement

The most important task when painting your historic home is the selection of a basic color for the body of the house and from one to three complimentary or contrasting colors for the porch, eaves, window moldings, and other architectural details found on the house. Selecting the appropriate colors and painting your house in a multi-color paint scheme can be both difficult and intimidating. Many of us were raised in the era of “white is right” and are not trained to handle color choice or placement. Painting a house also means working with color on a grand scale. Unlike the inside of your house your color selection is public and can have a visual impact on an entire street or neighborhood for years to come.

Choosing and placing colors for pleasing effect or harmony should be your goal, but this is a highly subjective criterion. Most unsuccessful paint schemes fail because the colors used are too bright and the contrast between adjacent colors is too great. One way to avoid overly bright colors is to stick to the historic paints offered by most major paint makers. These colors are subdued so that they provide a more harmonious contrast.

Do It Yourself or Hire a Contractor?

Painting a historic house is a big, time-consuming job. Here are a few pointers to help you decide either to paint the house yourself or to hire a contractor.

- Preparing the house for painting is ¾ of the work. This means scraping, feathering, and thoroughly cleaning the surface. It is a dirty thankless job but somebody has got to do it. Otherwise, you are setting yourself up for paint failure and more time and money spent on painting. If you are not willing to do this job, then you need to hire a contractor.
- There are two basic types of painting contractors. Production companies that do large developments, and custom painters. You should look for a custom painter, preferably one experienced with old houses.
- Ask for references and be sure to use them. Better yet, ask for examples of their work that you can look at.
- Try to determine whether the contractor is positive and enthusiastic about the job. You have to love old houses to paint them well.
- Choose someone who has been in business for a while and has a reputation to protect.
- Make sure you know how the contractor intends to do the job. For example, how does he intend to remove and dispose of old paint.
- If you are fortunate to have more than one contractor to choose from, be aware of the low bid. An exceptionally low bid usually means that halfway through the job, the painter will realize his mistake and finish up as quick-and-dirty as he can.
- Supervise the job yourself as much as possible.

- Avoid excessive highlighting of small architectural details. Not only does it make painting the house more difficult and time consuming, it also gives the house a polka-dot effect rather than a harmonious work of art.
- In general, projecting elements should be painted in lighter colors and recessed elements in darker colors. This works with natural light and shadow effects.
- In general, it is better to have darker colors at the bottom and lighter colors at the top of a house or architectural element. This avoids a top-heavy appearance.
- Your color scheme should be based on the existing or historical colors of the house—the color of existing bricks (if painted) or shingles.
- **Consider using paint charts based on historic paint colors produced by leading paint makers.** To be truly authentic, you can take paint chips from your house and have them duplicated by a professional.
- Once you are confident of your color selection, get a sample quart of paint mixed at a professional paint store. Apply a sample on an inconspicuous spot and live with it for a few days. Better to spend a little extra money and time than make a costly mistake.

Painting an historic building can be a daunting task. Judgment and taste are required as well as an appropriate amount of time, hard work (unless someone is doing the painting for you) and an understanding of how old houses were originally painted. The information in this publication provides you with a brief history of paint colors, and suggestions for the proper choice and placement of color for historic houses.

Remember that by City Ordinance, you must first receive a Certificate from the Architectural Review Board (ARB) before you begin to swing that paintbrush. The ARB recognizes that tastes change and that they are subjective. Therefore, this information is intended as a guide for the owners of Springboro’s historic homes who want to paint their treasures in the manner to which they are accustomed.

“Painting a house means working with color on a grand scale. Unlike the inside of your house, your color selection is public and will have a visual impact on the entire street and neighborhood for years to come.”

Note: Although this brochure uses the word “house” to describe historic buildings, the advice applies to all historic buildings in Springboro.

Painting Historic Houses in Springboro

Some Helpful Tips and Sage Advice on How to Care for your Treasure

Presented by
The City of Springboro
Architectural Review Board

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Paint Guidelines

- Start simple. Do not use more colors than you need. Most Springboro houses do not need more than two colors. If you keep it simple, you will be less likely to make a mistake or be unhappy with the results.
- Choose colors from paint sample chips of a good brand of paint—better paint will be truer to its chips.
- Pick your colors outside or under a variety of lighting conditions. Most paint makers now have artificial lighting that recreates indoor and outdoor conditions. Colors are truest outdoors in open shade or with overcast skies.
- Light colors shadow a lot and therefore show up imperfections. Dark colors do not shadow and therefore can be used to play down of even cover imperfections.
- Breaks between colors enhance and highlight architectural details.
- **Caution:** Color intensity appears greater when seen on a large surface as compared to a small color chip.