

# Choosing the RIGHT Colors for Your Old House: Painting Advice from the Building Doctor

**Possibly the most enduring image conjured by the words “historic preservation” is a grand Queen Anne Victorian mansion dressed up in a fresh and skillfully-applied coat of paint. But with so many paint colors and products to choose from, achieving that just-right image with your own old house, whatever the style, can be a daunting task. Get the paint right and you’ll be the envy of the neighborhood. Get it wrong and, well, neighbors can be downright vicious. Here’s my advice for taking on the task of painting your old house with confidence for satisfying results.**

Before we talk about the right colors, though, what do we mean when we say “color”? According to traditional color theory, the three basic attributes of color are hue, value, and intensity. Hue is the name of the color on the light spectrum: red, yellow, blue and everything in between. Value is the lightness (tint) or darkness (shade) of the color. Intensity is its purity or strength. So, the hue of that trim color you’re contemplating is blue. Is its value light or dark? Sky blue is a tint, navy blue is a shade. And how intense is the sky blue? Sky blue is always blue in hue and light in value, but it can be vivid, almost pure blue, or it can be neutralized or grayed. With these attributes in mind, let’s move on with some advice.

## Look Backward to Move Forward

Go into any store that sells paint and what do you find? A display of paint chips in a staggering array of hues, values, and intensities. Selecting colors that are appropriate for the style of your house, let alone colors you actually like, can seem impossible. However, a number of paint manufacturers have simplified the selection process by offering “historical” paint collections based on the available pigments and popular color trends of the times.

Yes, times were simpler then. In 1900, for example, homeowners could choose from around 100 colors of pre-mixed paint. These early paints were limited because they were based on natural pigments such as ochres, umbers, and oxides. The vast number of synthetic paint pigments available today, coupled with the technology to combine them, makes it possible to create or match any color imaginable. Having such unlimited choices can be paralyzing.

Using a historical paint collection can help you reduce your options to a manageable amount. You’ll still find the full spectrum of hues represented in these collections and some of them, such as the Sherwin-Williams Preservation Palettes, even give tips on how their paint products were promoted and applied for various architectural styles. Of course, you don’t have to limit yourself to these historical colors, but they do provide a good starting point to find colors that you like and that are appropriate to the style of your old house.

## Simplicity Brings Harmony

My next piece of advice is to keep your paint scheme simple. A couple of persistent notions intimidate homeowners when choosing paint colors. The first of these notions is that a correct historic paint scheme involves a bunch of bright, rich colors painstakingly applied to the myriad architectural details on a building’s façade. The second notion is that the trim and detail colors of a historic house have to contrast sharply with the main wall color. This notion reached its zenith in popularity in the early 1980s with the ubiquitous dark gray or blue house with glossy, bright white trim.

Create a unifying color scheme by varying the value of a single hue like the greens on this home.





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This homeowner created an attractive color scheme by grouping multiple hues with similar values and intensities.

As the preservation movement in America has matured, more scholarship and science has been applied to the field of historic paints. We've learned, for example, that the "Painted Ladies," those brightly polychromatic Victorian houses in San Francisco, were the exception and not the rule. Generally speaking, building owners during the Victorian era were conservative and that much color and visual activity didn't suit their buttoned-down tastes. We now understand that the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century trendsetters were generally looking to create harmony and unity on house exteriors. The promotional literature of the day shows recommended color schemes grouped closely by subtle shifts in hue or value.

With a few exceptions, house color schemes were historically limited to three or four colors: a body color, a major trim color, and one, or possibly two, accent colors. The body color is the main color of the exterior siding or wall material. If you have a brick house, the color of the brick is the body color. Trim and accent colors were selected to work with the body color. The bulk of the exterior woodwork and detail were painted in the trim color. Accent colors were used with the trim color to highlight and show off the more subtle architectural details of the house. Large beams on a bungalow porch that catch a lot of light and create shadows are not as critical to contrast with color as some of the smaller moldings or details that don't have a significant architectural presence.

You can achieve a more historically correct and visually appealing appearance by grouping the colors in your paint scheme more closely with less contrast. This can be done in two different ways:

- Within a hue, by reducing the difference between the tints and shades (or lightness or darkness) of a color. For example, rather than stark white, medium brown, and dark brown, use an off-white, tan, and medium brown so the shifts are less pronounced.
- Across multiple hues, by selecting colors with similar value or intensity. Reds and greens can work well with the common buff brick in Utah if their values are similar in "visual weight."

If you introduce visually strong tints or intense hues into your paint scheme, they should be balanced with other major areas of color. The façade should not be broken up by highly contrasting bands of color on horizontal belt-courses or vertical cornerboards, for example, and insignificant details should not become the focal point of the whole composition by jumping out at you.

### **They Had a Choice and So Do You**

Different colors and color schemes were popular for each architectural style: rich, saturated colors for Victorian; a palette inspired by nature for Arts & Crafts; light, neutralized hues for Neo-Classical. But for each style, the

full spectrum of hues was available and utilized. Just because the original owner of your house had a penchant for grays and maroons doesn't mean you have to. Here's where the terms "historically accurate" and "historically appropriate" come into play.

"Historical accuracy" is necessary to interpret a property to a period of historic significance. Researching and recreating paint schemes is common practice in the realm of managing landmark historic buildings. For example, because the Utah State Capitol is a public building and is architecturally and historically significant, the original paint and decorating choices should be considered ahead of our own tastes as stewards in the twenty-first century.

"Historically appropriate" paint schemes use color and placement in a manner consistent with the history of your house, but allow for personal taste and expression. Color choices were a matter of taste then and should be for you now as the current owner of an old house. Pick colors you like that are appropriate to the spirit and intent of the prevailing styles when your home was built. Unless there is some compelling reason for historical accuracy, the historically appropriate approach is perfectly acceptable for most home restoration projects.



Select colors that are appropriate for the architectural style of your home. The colors of this home—pale yellow walls, white trim, and dark shutters and door-work well with its high-style Classical Revival architecture.

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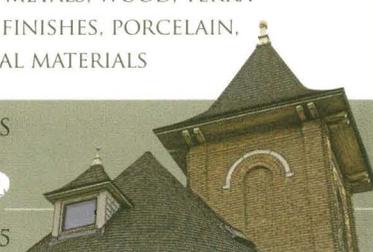
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Warm colors, red and yellows, advance toward the observer while cool colors, blues and greens, recede. Applying the warm yellow accent color to the cool blue trim color makes the yellow ornament appear to jump off the façade.

## And the Original Colors Are . . . ?

Opting to research and apply the original colors to your house can be a rewarding challenge. But here again, don't be too obsessed with exactly matching the historic colors. Accurately determining the original paint colors on an historic building is difficult. It requires laboratory analysis to identify the constituents of the paint film and knowledge of regional and local painting practices to know how the materials were prepared and applied. Just exposing an original sample of paint doesn't guarantee accuracy. Early painting mediums were not stable. Linseed oil, the most common binder in historic paints, darkens with age and many of the natural blue and green pigments faded quickly.

Then there is the matter of taste. Occasionally I hear from homeowners who go to the effort to reveal an original paint scheme only to find it uninspiring or, worse yet, colors they detest!

## Don't be a Slave to Fashion

Another bit of advice to consider is that trends took time to catch on and move around so there was frequent overlap between architectural styles. Foursquare homes were a popular transitional style between Victorian and the later Arts & Crafts and Period Revival Styles. Foursquares were commonly painted

in either Victorian or Arts & Crafts palettes. Many nineteenth-century homes were repainted in the early twentieth century with Arts & Crafts colors so they would look more up-to-date. If you're not enamored with the paint chips in your "correct" historic collection, it's okay to choose other colors, but the best results will be achieved when you stay true to the spirit and intent of the original tastemakers.

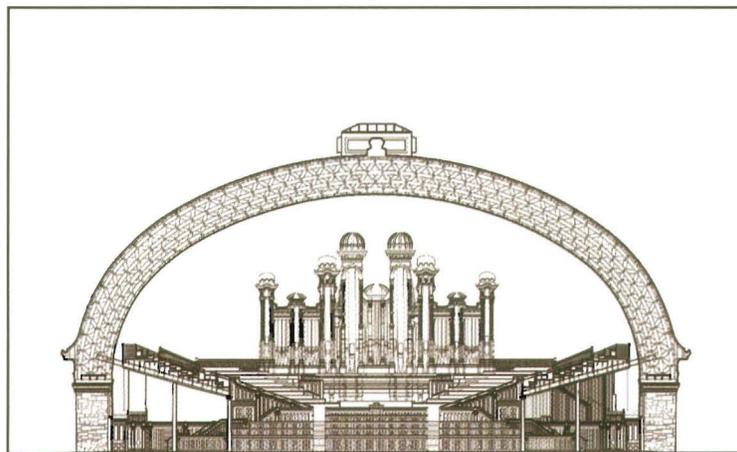
## Date Before You Marry

If you are unsure of your ideas, especially when selecting colors from those tiny little paint chips the paint store provides, try them out. Buy small quantities of paint and apply them together in test areas to make sure they're going to work. Yes, a quart of paint costs almost as much as a whole gallon and, yes, it's a bother to keep going back to the paint store to have them mix it "just a shade darker." But testing your ideas up-front with a few quarts of paint is far less troublesome than applying dozens of gallons of the wrong color. Getting your body, trim, and accent colors right before you or your painter begin in earnest can boost your confidence immeasurably and eliminate many of the headaches and nightmares that can plague such a project.

## Don't Panic!

My last bit of advice is to have fun. Well, okay, maybe not fun, but at least this part of your old house rehab should be enjoyable. You've completed all the unglamorous tasks, such as replacing sewer pipes and boilers. You've handled the big, messy jobs like tearing off five layers of old roofing and installing those handsome new architectural shingles. It's okay to anguish over colors for a while, but don't get confused or bogged down by too many options. Go ahead, pick a paint scheme that delights you, enhances the architecture of your old house, and shows the neighbors what a genius you really are. \*

Don Hartley is an architect with the Utah State Historic Preservation Office and has been advising historic building owners in Utah since 1984.



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## The Building Doctor answers some commonly asked painting questions:

### Which is better—oil or latex paint?

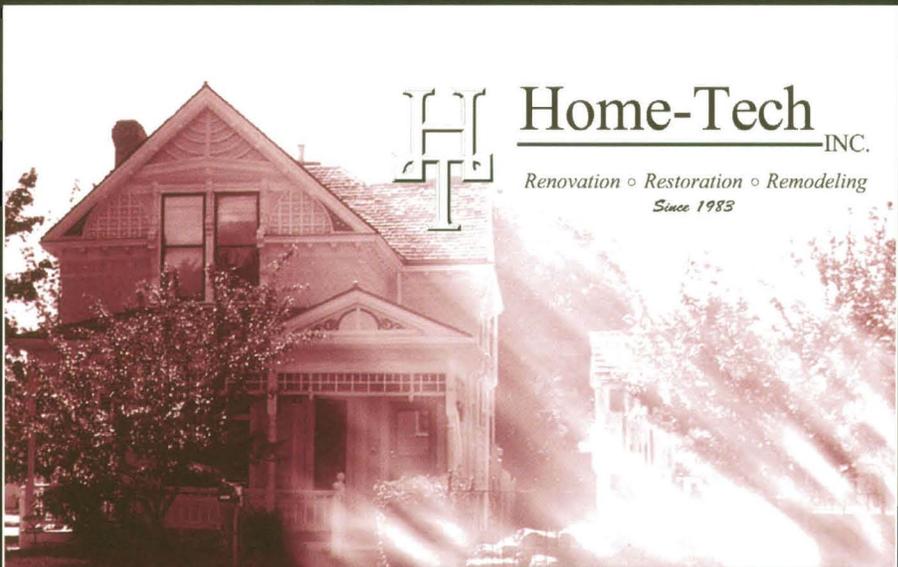
Latex paint, especially 100 percent acrylic paint for exterior use, is winning the oil vs. latex debate. For many years latex paint was less durable than its oil-based counterpart, but the durability of oil paint was diminished after lead was banned from house paint in the mid-1970s. Since then, the performance of latex has been improved so it is now performing as well as, if not better than, oil-based paint. Latex paint products are much safer for the painter and the environment, too. Unless there is some compelling reason to use oil-based products, I recommend 100 percent acrylic paint for exterior applications. As with any paint product, the key to a long-lasting paint job is the prep work.

### My painter wants to "powerwash" the house before she paints. Is that OK?

A mild wash to remove oxidized paint and surface grime is fine, but a powerwash is not. Painters frequently use a powerwasher capable of delivering 3,000 PSI at the wand tip to blow off old paint and clean the surface to reduce their hand-scraping time. Unfortunately, water is not very smart in this application and doesn't recognize the difference between wood and paint. Siding and trim boards can be very badly damaged when the high-pressure water removes old soft wood (raises the grain) along with flaking paint. High-pressure water drives deep into the pores of the wood. Any moisture remaining in the wood when the new paint is applied will cause the film to blister and fail. Plus, high-pressure water can blow in around doors, window sashes, and other trim to damage surfaces and furnishings inside the house. Unless your painter can demonstrate to your satisfaction that powerwashing will not cause the wood to look pitted, scarred, and grainy, tell her to leave the washing equipment on the truck.

### Paint is peeling in small areas on my house. Should I strip all the existing paint before I repaint?

No. If the bulk of the paint is still well-bonded to the previous paint film or the wood, there is no reason to remove it all. First look for the causes of failure and correct them. Is water from lawn sprinklers or leaky gutters causing the paint to fail? Is the paint on the outside of a bathroom wall being pushed off the wall by water vapor generated inside the bathroom? After the problem is resolved, scrape, apply primer in the failed areas, and apply the topcoats. Remember, prep work is the key to a quality, long-lasting finish.



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