

PAIN T COLORS FOR HISTORIC HOMES

PART I: COLONIAL AND FEDERAL 1640-1840

Paint was used to delineate the three main visual elements of Colonial and Federal houses:

- Body: the walls – usually clapboarded or shingled, sometimes boarded.
- Trim: the decorative woodwork that framed the large wall surfaces and often the smaller elements such as windows and doors.
- Sash: The movable elements – doors, windows, shutters.

First Period houses rarely painted trim and sash in different colors and so were generally of two colors only; later styles often had three.

Colonial Period (1640-1780)

First Period or Post-Medieval (1640s–1720s)

- Architecture: asymmetry, verticality. 17th-century colors were derived from earth, stone or other natural pigments.
- Interiors: Earthy reds, indigos, ochre, burnt umber.
- Body: clapboards, originally not painted or stained but weathered to dark brown. Chocolate paint appropriate today.
- Trim: Unpainted or painted Indian red/Spanish brown to contrast with unpainted body.

Second Period or Georgian (1725-1780)

- Architecture: symmetry, horizontality, classical proportions
- Georgian houses favored stronger colors from naturally derived pigments. Colors imitating stone construction were popular exteriors, interiors were bolder and brighter than once thought.
Modest and rural houses often not painted. Strongly contrasted color schemes favored.
- Body: dark stone colors, chocolates, orange, ochres, greys and reds.
- Trim: Almost always white, but a softer, yellower white than today's white.
- Cornices, window and door casings, cornerboards and molded details often simulated stone – pale grey, yellowish-white, very pale blue, sometimes with sand blown into the wet paint.
- Doors: always dark color – chocolate, red, green or blue.
- Roofs: occasionally red, chocolate or yellow

Federal Period (1780-1830)

Fashionable taste moved away from the more robust Georgian toward lighter colors: white, off-white, pale shades of stony gray, and ochre. Bright, clear tones in interiors, often in contrast with pale trim – creams, pumpkins, sage green, muted blues etc. The 1812 painting guide by Hezekiah Reynolds of CT advised a palette of “white, cream, straw, orange, pea-green, parrot green, grass green, red, slate and black.” Lighter colors were fashionable, but darker ones were still used for more traditional tastes. Contrasts were less marked than on Georgian houses.

- Body: White, cream, straw were fashionable, but orange, pea-green, red, slate met more conservative, traditional tastes.
- Trim: White, or sometimes the same color as the body.
- Shutters and doors were dark green or black.
- House fronts were sometimes painted in fashionable, lighter (and more expensive) colors, while the back and/or the sides were in the more traditional, and cheaper, reds.
- Rural houses were often unpainted until the middle of the 19th century.

Greek Revival (1825-1860)

Colors remained traditional with no technological innovation in colors till 1850s, so the earth-based pigments and natural stone colors of the Federal period are suitable for interiors and exteriors. Interior colors begin to reflect the richness and depth of color of the Victorian period.

- Body: White or off-white, or stone colors (greys, pale blue greys, grey browns, tans) or straw (ochres and yellows.)

Off Whites

<i>Pure White</i> Sherwin Williams	<i>Alabaster</i> Sherwin Williams	<i>Dover White</i> Sherwin Williams	<i>Antique White</i> Sherwin Williams
<i>Shoji White</i> Sherwin Williams	<i>Ivory Lace</i> Sherwin Williams	<i>Oyster White</i> Sherwin Williams	<i>Simply White</i> Sherwin Williams

Stone Colors

<i>Downing Stone</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Stone Lion</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Alpaca</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Colonnade Gray</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>
<i>Lazy Gray</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Serious Gray</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Sleepy Blue</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Smoky Blue</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>

Straw Colors

<i>Glad Yellow</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>They Call it Mellow</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Fun Yellow</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Colonial Yellow</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>
<i>Decisive Yellow</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Sun Bleached Ochre</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Windswept Canyon</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Honeycomb</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>

- Trim: White, off-white, cream

Cream Colors

<i>Creamy</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Jersey Cream</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Fresco Cream</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>	<i>Banana Cream</i> <i>Sherwin Williams</i>
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- Sash: Typically green doors and shutters, and black sash.

Green Colors



- The most common (almost standard) color scheme: White or off-white body, green doors and shutters, black sash.
- Rural houses were increasingly painted from 1825 onward.

PART II: VICTORIAN 1840-1900

Paint was used to delineate the three main visual elements of Victorian period houses:

- Body: the walls – usually clapboarded or shingled, sometimes boarded.
- Trim: the decorative woodwork that framed the large wall surfaces and the smaller elements such as windows and doors.
- Sash: the movable elements – doors, windows, shutters.
- Body, trim and sash were usually painted different colors. A three-color paint scheme was the most common, but later in the period houses were often given four or even five colors.

Victorian architecture is characterized by the fact that different styles of house were popular at the same time. In this respect, it differs significantly from Colonial architecture, where styles were sequential rather than simultaneous. In paint colors and paint schemes, the Victorian period saw a gradual transition toward a wider range of deeper colors and stronger contrasts. There were two distinct color periods: 1870 was the turning point.

Early Victorian (1840-1870)

Common architectural styles: The most popular was the Italianate, but Gothic Revival houses were quite common. Paint colors did not change much from the Federal period: Paints were still mixed by the painter from natural pigments ground into white lead and linseed oil, so many of the earth/stone colors continued to be used. The first “color card” published in the US (1842) included three shades of grey, and three of fawn (called “drab”). Darker, dignified colors were used on larger houses and those in exposed locations: lighter, livelier shades for smaller, more concealed houses. The so-called “positive” colors (white, yellow, red, blue and black) were avoided.

- Body: Traditional stone- and earth-colors, soft and naturalistic to blend in with surroundings.
- Trim: Never white, often a darker shade of the body color, or vice-versa if the body was dark. Sometimes body, trim and sash were painted in three increasingly darker shades of the same color.
- Sash: Often the same as the trim.

Later Victorian (1870-1900)

Common architectural styles: Second Empire/Mansard, Stick, Queen Anne, Shingle. Paints now were mass-produced and mass-marketed in resealable cans. The wider range of colors included both new pastels (rose, peach, terracotta and olive) as well as deeper and more saturated colors. Strong contrasts were favored. Three-color schemes for the exterior became the norm: one color for the body; a second for the trim; the third, always the darkest, for the sash (doors, sashes, shutters.)

The primary pigments (red, blue, yellow) were often combined to create new “secondary” colors: orange, purple, greens, etc. “Tertiary” colors were a mix of primary and secondary colors: dark mulberry, ginger, moss green, brick reds, buff etc. The choice of colors was now guided by “color theory” instead of personal preference. The basis of color theory was the color wheel, which enabled two versions of “color harmony”: harmony by analogy and harmony by contrast.

- “Harmony by analogy” used adjacent colors on the wheel: e.g. red/orange, orange/purple, blue/green, yellow/green, green/orange
- “Harmony by contrast” used opposite colors on the wheel: e.g. red/green, blue/orange, yellow/purple.

Second Empire/Mansard (1855-1885)

The early houses in the style continued the Italianate taste for neutral colors: grays, tans, ochres, warm beiges. Later in the period more colors appeared and stronger contrasts became popular: deep tones of russets, olives, gray-greens, ochres and browns in combination. The aim was to achieve a more formal, urban look.

- Body and Trim: two shades of the same color, usually, but not always, with the lighter for the trim.
- Sash, doors and shutters were black or very dark green, shutters sometimes a very dark shade of the body color.

Stick Style (1860-1890)

Characterized by an abundant use of flat trim boards to define, or create, sections of the clapboarded walls or to impose geometric patterns on them.

- Trim and Body: Flat trim boards clearly distinguished from clapboard sheathing, using vibrant, contrasting colors: yellow with dark green, dark red with olive, light and dark gray-green etc.

- Sash, doors and shutters: dark but colorful: dark brown, deep red or maroon joined the more traditional dark green or black.

The Stick style and its colors may be seen as transitional to the Queen Anne.

Queen Anne (1880-1915)

The architecture was characterized by variety, irregularity, asymmetry. Complex massing of building elements, bays, towers, gables, porches, windows of all sizes. Plentiful use of decorative motifs in molded mastic (plaster or sawdust set into resin.) Walls often clad in both clapboards and shingles, which were often cut into decorative shapes. Rich tertiary colors were popular, light colors were not. Body, trim and sash always in different colors, but four- and occasionally five-color schemes were popular.

- Body: one or two strong colors (usually different for clapboards and shingles)
- Trim: a color unifying the body colors. Often a different accent color was used for decorative features.
- Sash: the darkest color on the house: dark green, deep brown, black, deep red, maroon, chocolate, deep umber etc.

Shingle (1880-1900)

“Wooden” and rustic in appearance so colors must be “woody,” not light colors.

- Body: dark brown stain, or dark brown/chocolate paint. Dark olives, gray-browns and dark greens also possible.
- Trim: beige or tan to coordinate with body, or dark contrasting color – dark green, dark olive, maroon.
- Sash and doors: dark.

RESOURCES

[Painting Historic Exteriors: Colors, Application and Regulation.](#) (1998, reprinted 2016), Susan E. Maycock and Sarah J. Zimmerman, Cambridge Historical Commission, 831 Massachusetts Ave, Cambridge, MA 01928. 617.349.4683. A comprehensive guide to identifying each architectural style, with descriptions of the colors and color schemes appropriate to it. An essential resource for owners of historic houses.

[Historic Colors of America: A Guide to Color, Styles, and Architectural Periods,](#) Historic New England, 141 Cambridge Street, Boston, MA 02114, 617.227.3956, <http://www.historicnewengland.org>, info@historicnewengland.org. A brief overview of the main architectural periods/styles, with a list of the colors appropriate to each. Accompanied by a color chart of more than 100 historic colors, developed by HNE in conjunction with California Paints, that are available from California Paints dealers. HNE offers period paint color consultations to historic home owners through its Historic Owner membership.

[A Field Guide to American Houses.](#) Virginia and Lee McAlester, (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1984.) A guide to all the main architectural styles/periods, illustrating the main features of each,

together with typical detailing, geographic distribution and regional variants. Highly recommended.

[Benjamin Moore Historic Color Collection](#)

[Sherwin Williams Historic Collection](#)