



# PAINT PRIMER

## *For The Port Townsend National Historic District*

Painting your building is one of the most dramatic and affordable improvements you can make. Its color scheme can give your business "street appeal", an important factor in the health and well-being of the entire business district.

When deciding on color selection and placement, keep in mind that there are no true rules. The best schemes often break what rules there are. However, we are speaking about colors for buildings in a National Historic District. This designation brings with it a responsibility to proceed in a thoughtful and sensitive manner when selecting a scheme. Of course you will want to express your personal taste. Fortunately, this is easily done while at the same time being aware of the age and style of the building because of a vast range of acceptable possibilities. There are two basic principles to be observed:

1. Your colors need to be selected from those that were considered appropriate at the time your building was designed and built; and
2. Color placement needs to be typical of what the original designer, owner and builder would have done.

A word of advice up front from a man in the business: James Martin, owner of "The Color People," a Denver based architectural color consulting company, cautions, "Let the market be your judge. Don't over do it. Don't over sell. If your scheme is too busy or too noisy, people will miss what's in the shop window...Appropriateness in historical preservation is about honoring the building by honoring its context. It's not just your building. It is part of the history of your city and the legacy of the people who live there."

### PREPARATION

Making the decision to add another coat of paint to exterior surfaces of an historic building requires consideration of many more possible problems than with recent construction. The next coat of paint could be the one to create a paint thickness of about 1/16", triggering

cracking and peeling. Also, the thicker the paint the less sharp the decorative detail becomes.

Especially with an old building, preparation is crucial to the success of project. We highly recommend that you get a copy of "#10 Preservation Brief - Exterior Problems on Historic Woodwork," published by the United States Department of Interior, National Park Service (available to copy at the Main Street office) before you embark on your project.

If there is brickwork, you need to check the mortar joints. If they aren't in good shape, you'll need to have the tuckpointing done first. Unpainted brick needs to remain unpainted, but this is the time to repair the joints. If the brick is already painted and tuckpointing is not done before you paint, the paint will not hold.

Is the decorative cornice at the top of the front of the building in good condition? The flashing that seals the joint of this parapet wall and the roof often goes bad, letting water leak inside the brick wall. The water will cause deterioration from within the wall. This can most easily be seen by the bricks of the top few feet "spalling"(the front of them will pop off) or by an excessive loss of mortar confined to a specific area at the top of the building. This dampness will also prevent paint from adhering to the building. And make sure all downspouts are draining properly and have no leaks. If not, you will have more dampness and immediate paint failure.

If the building is constructed of or contains metal work, make sure that any seals in the metal that have broken are rewelded or renailed and caulked together.

It is absolutely necessary that the building is cleaned and free of dirt and fungus. If it's not clean, the paint won't hold. Remove any loose flaking, scaling, blistering, peeling or crumbling previous paints or water soluble coatings. Glossy surfaces must be dulled by sanding or de-glossing and washed clean with water. Low pressure water cleaning (not more than 600 psi), used cautiously,

---

## CAUTION

Before undertaking any project involving paint removal, applicable state and federal laws on lead paint removal and disposal must be taken into account and carefully followed.

Almost all paints made before 1950 contain lead. Scraping and dry sanding releases the lead, a highly damaging heavy metal in dust form. This lead dust then enters the human system through pores of the skin and through the lungs.

The use of heat for stripping also creates toxic fumes which can be inhaled. Workers need to wear High Efficiency Particulate air filters to be completely covered. They should not eat, drink, or smoke where lead dust is present.

---

scrubbing with a bristle brush and using gentle detergents, is usually sufficient to clean dirt, grime and loose paint from a masonry or metal surface. Fill all holes and cracks with appropriate caulking.

If complete paint removal is required:

1. Install a small plate over an inconspicuous area so a record of the previous paint color is available to future owners.
2. Never sandblast or high pressure waterblast to remove old paint. Instead, use abrasion - scraping and sanding. Avoid mechanical sanders if possible and do not use rotary sanders.
3. Consider using heat guns and heat plates. They soften old paint so it can be scraped off. Be sure to follow manufacturer's directions carefully to avoid fire.
4. If chemical removal must be used, follow manufacturer's directions carefully. This method can be messy and caustic, not to mention, toxic.

After removing peeling paint, sand rough edges until smooth. Sand glossy areas until dull. Wash clean with water and allow to dry thoroughly. Spot-prime bare areas with primer. Metal needs to be primed with metal primer. Finish with one to two coats of paint.

## SELECTING A COLOR SCHEME

If you have time, you may want to see if you can find out the color history of the building. Old photos at the Jefferson County Historical Society, even though they are black and white, will tell you what areas were light, medium, and dark in value.

Then, to take it a step further, you can use an exacto knife to cut two lines (a straight one at the top and another underneath at a 45-degree angle) on your building's painted surface to expose old layers of paint. You can't count on these matching the original colors exactly because of age, chemical action, sun, dirt and bleeding through of upper coat colors, but it might give you an idea of what was used. If you wet the area with mineral oil (spit will actually do fine for short-term observation) you will see a color closer to the original. Two words of caution:

1. Don't mistake a light primer coat for the original finish color.
2. Current paint historians are finding that chemical changes through the years make this an inexact science at best unless you employ an expert who does the proper chemical tests. Just be sure to check in all locations where different colors may have been used, so you get a complete picture of the original scheme.

When selecting colors, existing color of unpainted brick or stonework needs to be given consideration, since it is part of your scheme. Also, do you have signage with definite colors? What about an existing awning? Your new scheme must work to tie together all these given elements. Your choice should also complement the colors of neighboring buildings and not produce an effect of visual competition or discord.

What colors were popular during Victorian Times? The whites and off-whites of the Greek Revival era (1820-1860) quickly became passe'. They were replaced by colors that imitated natural building materials, such as gray stone, walnut brown wood, slate blue, shingle gray, brick red, copper green, red and terra cotta tile, or weathered bronze.

Colors found in earth and other natural materials were also used extensively. These colors were achieved by mixing two secondary colors together (called tertiary colors). Secondary colors were made by mixing two primary colors - red and blue, for example, or yellow and red - together. These tertiary colors are rich, soft and

rather muted. Most of them combine well with each other, making your job surprisingly easy. Our District's Color Palette is made up of documented Victorian tertiary colors.

Traditionally, the wall color, which dominates the building's appearance, is best if it is a muted tone, leaving colors that are a bit more intense for trim features. A good rule of thumb is the larger and plainer the building, the more subtle the color. Small buildings or those with elaborate detailing can often use more colors and more intense colors.

Color detailing on commercial buildings was, as a rule, not as complicated as on residential construction. The kind of detailing we see today on "painted ladies", picking out small trim elements, was not often done. Dark colors were common.

### COLOR DISTRIBUTION

Your scheme can include a base color, applied to wall surfaces and the storefront piers and then one or two trim colors. The major trim color defines the decorative elements such as the cornice, window caps and frames, storefront cornice and pilasters (side half-columns) and bulkheads, tying together the upper facade and the storefront. A minor trim color can be used on the storefront frame, doors, small details on cornices, window hoods and bulkheads and possibly window sash.

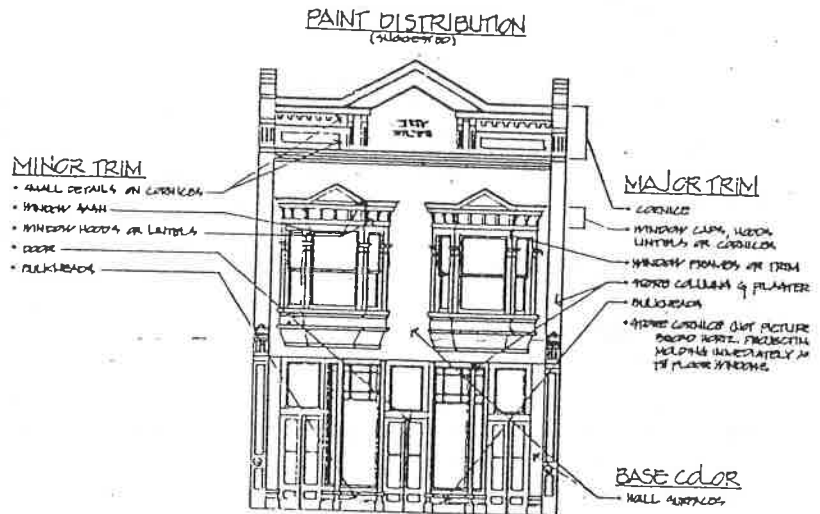
If major trim elements have enough dimension to visually stand on their own with the light and shadow generated by their depth, then you don't necessarily need to use a minor trim color. However, if this is not the case, the minor trim color should enhance the color scheme established by the base and major trim.

If you don't wish to include a minor trim color, you could use the body color to give contrast to decoration, for instance, on the window caps, just so the body color is surrounded by trim color. Often a darker shade of the major trim is used as the minor trim color. Bevelled edges, called "chamfer" can be accented with a minor trim color for visual strengthening when seen at a distance.

Traditionally, the darkest color was used on the window sash, causing the trim around the glass to recede. This treatment visually seems to draw the customer into the building rather than push them away. Sash was most

often painted dark red, green or brown and was the only area where glossy paint was used.

The recessed areas of panels (for instance, on the bulkheads) were usually painted one of the darker colors in the scheme and the protruding parts were the lighter color. If your side wall is already painted brick or masonry, consider using a color suggesting the original color of the structural material of the wall.



### THINGS TO AVOID

1. No color should overpower all the others. If the first thing you notice is red trim, for instance, something is wrong with the red and its relationship with the other colors.
2. Avoid great contrast between adjacent colors. Use strongly contrasting accent colors only in small amounts such as for a stripe, accent on a chamfer or as a sash.
3. Avoid making projecting elements darker in color than surrounding elements. Work with the natural light and shadow effects instead of against them.
4. Avoid using darker colors at the top and lighter colors on the bottom. This gives a top-heavy appearance.
5. Don't over-decorate the facade.
6. Don't use pure white paint. It was not favored at that time, especially for commercial buildings.

If you need some inspiration, look at the suggested color scheme boards at the Planning Department. You might also check the color affinity charts on page 38 of "Victorian Exterior Decoration" by Moss and Winkler, available for perusal at the Jefferson County Historical Society.

### HELPFUL TRICK

Once you've decided on a few possible schemes, consider making a drawing of your building and trying out the schemes on paper. If you don't have a current photo you can trace, make a photographic slide of the building. Take your picture head on and about mid level. You may need to stand on your car roof to do this.

Once you have the slide, use a projector to project the image onto paper taped to a wall. A letter-size sheet will usually do, but if your building is detailed, you may need to use a bigger sheet. Now you are ready to begin drawing.

If the building is composed of all straight lines, you may want to use a ruler. Usually this isn't the case. If the building is elaborate and repetitive, just sketch one of the sections. Include all signage that will remain.

Now you have a free-handed drawing. You may want to trace over it using tracing paper and a ruler. Be sure to gray out the windows to give the building a "closer-to-real-life" appearance. Photo-copy this about 10 times. If you'd like a larger print, some copy machines will make enlargements for you. Save the original. You may need it later.

Now that you have a rendering, note any existing colors (such as stone) that you will need to work around. Find paint chips that match existing colors as closely as possible. Using these chips for reference, color in these colors on your picture, using colored pencil or felt tips you might have to mix to get a color that's close. A match is next to impossible. At this point, your concern is mainly color placement rather than true color.

Play with color distribution. If you've decided on a body color, experiment with different trim colors and their placement. You might find that what you thought would look good, doesn't. You might try a scheme just for fun that turns out to be a winner. Take your renderings outside and look at them in all lights. Hang them up and live with them for a while. Stand back and squint. Which scheme best supports your building's architecture?

When you think you've settled on the best one, if you want even a more exact representation, take a fresh print and, using paint chips, actually cut and paste the correct colors on your drawing. If you still like your scheme, save it and the good pencil and pen rendering. They will be helpful guides during the painting process.

### TIME TO PAINT!

Now buy a quart of each paint color you've chosen. Be sure you get paint that's the color on the paint chips. To assure this, you must require that the clerk match to your chips, not just to the color formulas they represent. Then apply paint in crucial places on your building and check the effect. Does the paint truly look good with the natural materials on the building and with existing signage and awnings? Does the scheme harmonize with neighboring building colors? Does it look good at different times of day and night, in sun and shadow? Will the scheme wear well over the years? Does it look outstanding without standing out to far? If the answer's "yes", you've undoubtedly got a winner.

If the scheme follows the Historic Preservation Commission's Color Guidelines and your colors are from the approved palette, you only need to fill out an application so your scheme is on record. Go ahead and paint!

If you've opted to select colors other than those in the palette, or to use a scheme that in some way does not comply with the Guidelines, then you must schedule a design review with the Historic Preservation Commission. Your colored rendering will be helpful in explaining your plan during review.

Your commissioners sincerely hope that the Paint Primer has made this process easier for you. We thank you for taking good care of your building. We are all stewards together. Pride in our Landmark Historic District is necessary to its survival.

---

The Paint Primer was prepared by the volunteer effort of the Historic Preservation Commission, City of Port Townsend. Design and printing were contributed by the Port Townsend Main Street Project. May 1993.

---