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Maintaining Old Houses

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With any historic building, maintenance is the key to its preservation. As is usually the case, **prevention is the best cure**. Deferred maintenance is simply another term for neglect. Periodic inspections and regular, routine maintenance are the most efficient and cost-effective interventions to prevent most small problems from becoming large ones. It is cheaper, easier, and faster to fix that annoying drip from a pipe now before it becomes a flood that will require difficult, time-consuming, and costly repairs later.

The U.S. Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* should always be the guiding principles underpinning every facet of the maintenance program for historic houses. The *Standards* are common sense principles in non-technical language about maintaining, repairing, and replacing historic materials, as well as designing new additions. They are online at: nps.gov/hps/tps/standguide/

As always, BE SAFE. If you feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or unsure of your abilities, hire a professional.

With proper care and maintenance, you can ensure a long lifespan for your home!

Create a Maintenance Plan

First step: learn your property. Observe, inspect, explore. Find out what you have (such as what kind of foundation, what type of roofing material, name and model of furnace). Also, note what condition everything is in. Are there repairs that need to be made now? Is a sink draining slowly? Will the hot water heater need replacing next year?

Second step: write down what you learn. A good way to organize all that information is to create four lists or files. Together, these are your maintenance plan.

1. Prioritized list of required repairs. Rank each task in terms of need. The first item on the list is the one that needs to be fixed soonest. Some examples, in order of priority:

- 1) fix plumbing leak
- 2) replace broken glass in window

- 3) repaint exterior woodwork
- 4) adjust sticking door

2. Routine maintenance tasks need to be done on a cyclical basis (daily, seasonally, annually) to keep your house in good repair. Some examples:

- clean gutters and downspouts—spring and fall
- mow grass—weekly during growing season
- replace smoke detector batteries—annually
- have chimney swept—annually

3. Periodic inspections are scheduled checkups to see if anything needs to be repaired or serviced. Some of these are done by professionals, like the termite inspector, or the HVAC guy. Some can be done by the homeowner, especially two very important inspections:

- Walk around outside your house **DURING** a heavy rainstorm to check for proper drainage and to make sure your gutters and downspouts are working.
- Walk around inside your house (don't forget the attic and basement) shortly **AFTER** a heavy rainstorm to check for any leaks.

Why do these two inspections in the rain? *Because the faulty disposal of rainwater is the most common cause of house deterioration!*

4. Maintenance file. Keep in a file folder all the receipts for all the work done on your house: what was done, when it was done, how much it cost, and who did the work. This file will protect you if somebody tries to sell you a new hot water heater, but you have the invoice when it was replaced four years ago (it should last ten years at least). This file will also remind you of those contractors who did a good job, and the ones you will never call again.

Unplanned Repairs — Storm damage, catastrophic events, and unexpected failures of mechanical equipment can wreak havoc on a maintenance budget. Do try to set aside contingency funds for such situations.

Contractor List

You may want to create a contractor list of people to call for different services. These names could come from your maintenance file or from recommendations by friends and neighbors. You should include two types of services providers: (1) routine service providers, such as: plumber, electrician, painter, handyman, termite/pest control, security system, arborist, HVAC, chimneysweep, lawn service; and, (2) historic materials contractors—persons or companies who specialize in the repair/replacement of historic building materials that are relevant to your house. These might include blacksmith, architect, historic lighting specialist, masonry restorer, mortar analyst, paint analyst, plasterer, window restorer, carpenter, and joiner.

A Few Good Resources

Websites

Atlanta Preservation & Planning Services, LLC website, Resources page. Has links to more resources and free downloads relating to home maintenance.

atlantapreservation.com/resources/

The Preservation Briefs of the National Park Services. Assist owners in recognizing and resolving common maintenance and repair problems for historic buildings.

nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm

There are many Do It Yourself (DIY) websites. A comprehensive, easy-to-use site is the Building Inspection, Diagnosis and Repair Encyclopedia.

inspectapedia.com

Decatur Old House Fair Resources. Contains national, local, and technical resources.

decaturoldhousefair.com/resources

YouTube videos are available showing you step-by-step how to accomplish many home maintenance tasks and repairs. Do a search for “home maintenance” on the YouTube website and find about 2,170,000 videos.

youtube.com

Print Materials

Amazon.com lists 4,448 books in the category of “Home & House Maintenance”. Have a general one on hand for reference. It also helps to read up on a particular topic before you have a professional come to perform service or repairs. You’ll be familiar with the terminology and your house’s system, and will be able to understand what the technician tells you.

Fisher, Charles E. and Hugh C. Miller, *Caring for Your Historic House*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1998. Out of print, but copies still available online. If you can only get one—get this one!

Young, Robert A. *Historic Preservation Technology*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008. A good textbook on all aspects of building materials and pathology.

Weaver, Martin E. *Conserving Buildings: A Manual of Techniques and Materials*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997. Another good textbook.

Ching, Francis D. K. *A Visual Dictionary of Architecture*. 2nd ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012. This is a great resource for learning about the structure of buildings and the names of architectural elements.