

Sensitive Rehabilitation

By Trail End State Historic Site Superintendent Cynde Georgen; from *Trail End Notes*, August 2005

On this year's Grand Home Tour, ticket holders were treated to five wonderful historic homes – four private residences and one historic house museum, Trail End. Tour participants were impressed by the restoration work put into each home. Everyone was equally delighted by each home's unique character, and by the touches that expressed the individuality of their owners.

Caring for an old house, especially one that “needs work,” can seem a daunting task to an owner who wants to live comfortably as well as retain the historic character of the dwelling. Some general guidelines that can help anyone contemplating the rehabilitation of an old house come from the National Park Service through the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*.



Trail End Gate Restoration, undated (TESHS Collection)

Don't be alarmed by the prospect of following guidelines written by a federal agency – we'll translate them for you! Only owners with homes listed on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places who wish to qualify for a rehabilitation tax credit need to follow the standards to the letter. The rest of us can look to them as a set of guiding principles that can help us achieve a sensitive rehabilitation.

- **Using a building for the purpose for which it was built is best – and usually easier!** Although historic houses can be sensitively converted to commercial use, a home restored as a home can better utilize an existing floor plan.
- **Avoid removing or changing historic material and architectural features that add to the character of the building.** Simplifying a Queen Anne by removing a tower or the gingerbread detail destroys features that make it a fine example of an eye-catching style.

- **Recognize the building as a product of its time.** Resist the temptation to add elements that were never there, or that come from another architectural style; they diminish rather than add to your home's character.
- **Remember that buildings evolve over time and that some alterations done by previous owners are now historic.** At least consider retaining them if their condition allows.
- **Recognize distinctive features and examples of craftsmanship and preserve them.** Learn to appreciate the nuances that make your home unique; that damaged parquet floor in the entrance hall, for example, really might worth the effort of restoration.
- **Repair a deteriorated feature if at all possible.** If it's beyond hope, replace it by matching its design and materials if you can. Replace a missing element only if you know what it looked like.
- **If you need to clean historic surfaces, use the gentlest means possible.** For example, removing lichen from stone may be achieved with a power washer and plain water; harsh chemicals are probably unnecessary. Never sandblast, as it damages surfaces.
- **Protect any archaeological resources.** While much more important for federally-owned properties where specific laws apply, you may want to leave in place the old paving stones you found when digging up the garden.
- **Make sure any new additions will not destroy the historic materials of original construction.** While you want the addition to be compatible with the existing building, it should also be recognizable and documented as a later feature.
- **Additions or other new construction should be removable.** In other words, if you (or the next owner) should ever decide to remove the addition, the integrity of original construction should remain intact.

The overall goal of the *Secretary's Standards* is to focus homeowners on sensitive rehabilitation, where the design and character of the original building is respected. Such awareness usually results in a home that is not only more attractive, but more valuable as well. As evident from the houses on this year's Grand Home tour, sensitivity to the historic character and integrity of a building does not preclude the personal, creative and even whimsical touches of those who own and inhabit the home.



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