

What is an Historically Appropriate Paint Color?

Choosing “historically appropriate” paint colors for historic buildings can be mind boggling for the average property owner. What exactly does the term “historically appropriate” mean? How restrictive is it? Does it allow for any personal creativity? Where can one turn to get some direction?

Historic color schemes are not prescriptive and they do allow for a great deal of flexibility. However, historic color schemes fall into very general categories, according to the architectural style of the building. Color schemes for historic buildings generally have the three following components:

1. The body, or building walls
2. Trim
3. Doors

In a very broad sense historic architectural styles, and exterior color schemes, in America fall into five general categories. Between 1790 and 1830 body colors generally were pale yellows, whites or greys with very light to white trim, and doors were usually black or had a natural finish. Between 1820 and 1840 (commonly referred to as the late Federal through Neo-Classical period) the dominant exterior color scheme was a white body with green trim and shutters, with dark colored doors. Colors schemes shifted to dominantly pale earth tones during the Gothic and Italianate Revival or Early Victorian (c. 1840-1870). During the late Victorian (c. 1870-1890) the predominant building color palette encompassed dark, rich, saturated, somewhat “muddy” colors. The Colonial Revival period (c. 1890-1920) saw gradual return to white and light pastel colors.

Many paint stores have historic paint palettes and can assist property owners with historically appropriate palettes. Local historic organizations often also are good resources for researching historically accurate and appropriate color schemes.