

## Porches



151 W. 12<sup>th</sup> Street

The porch components at this house are a good example of proper maintenance and restoration.

Primary porches and their components are significant elements and character-defining features of the architecture of a structure. They are often the primary focal point of an historic building, and because of their decoration and articulation, help define the style of the building. Entrances across porches are functional and ceremonial elements for most buildings. Porches traditionally have been a social gathering place as well as the transition area between exterior and interior.

There shall be no changes in existing porches, trim and ornamentation on the building other than painting or repair unless

the owner wishes to restore an earlier, documentable appearance. Any replaced or repaired portions of porches or trim that are visible and above grade, including but not limited to, columns, railings, balusters, decks, steps, foundations, and fascia shall match the original members in scale, design, and materials. When available, photographic documentation or other evidence of the original porch should be incorporated in the application.

Primary or secondary façade porches and steps that are appropriate to the structure's style and development shall not be removed, enclosed, or otherwise altered. Porches and additions reflecting later architectural styles, and which are important to the building's historical integrity shall be retained.

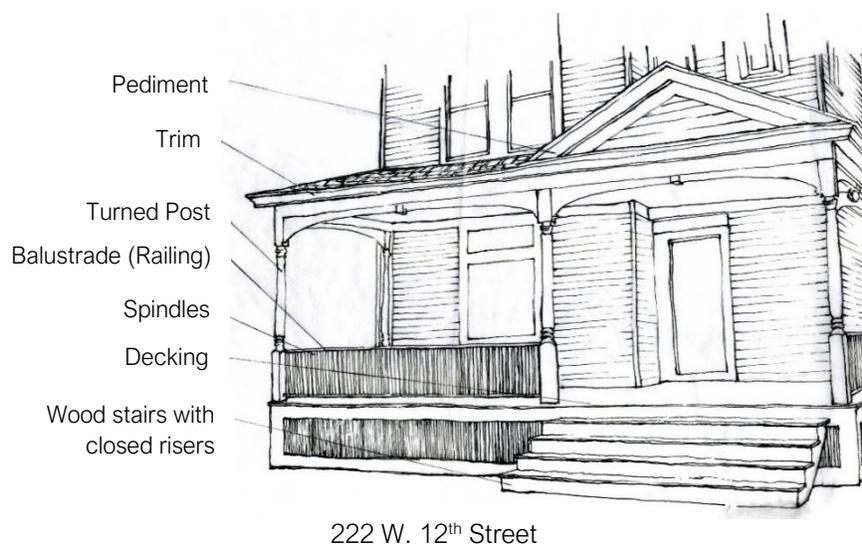
The best approach to porch care is to continue maintenance of the porch by caulking, patching, and painting the existing features. If replacement becomes necessary, substitution of salvaged materials for deteriorated portions is the most acceptable alternative.

### Guidelines

1. Historic porches shall be maintained and repaired. Inspect wood, masonry, and other materials of a porch for signs of peeling paint, wood deterioration, open joints around frames, deteriorating putty, inadequate caulking, and improper drainage. Correct any of these conditions by repairing or replacing with materials that match existing historic elements in terms of material, appearances, and size. Retain as much of the existing material as feasible.

2. Deteriorated original porches and porch elements, such as the railing, balusters, newel post, and columns shall be repaired or replaced – following recognized preservation methods so that the character of the porch is not compromised.
3. If a porch has been altered, consider restoring it back to its original design. If the historic design is unknown, then base the design of the restoration on other traditional porches on buildings of a similar architectural style.
4. Enclosing a front porch negatively impacts the visual character of both the structure and the streetscape and is inappropriate.
5. If historic porches which have been enclosed in the past are proposed to be remodeled or altered, they shall be restored to the period of significance, unless the enclosure, by nature of its age, architectural significance, or other special circumstance, has achieved historic significance of its own.
6. Proposed new porches shall be similar to historic porches which have been removed with regard to size, style, materials and detail to the extent such historic porch can be documented. Where inadequate documentation exists for an original porch, proposed new porches shall be typical of those built in the style of the historic building.

### Historic Porch Components

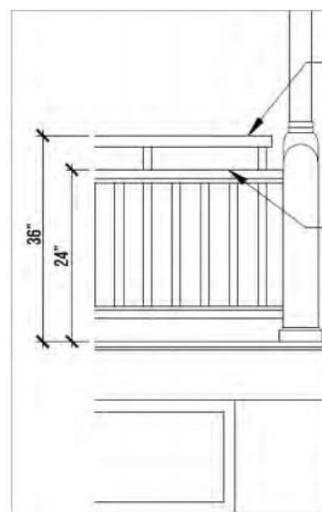


Posts/Columns/Pilasters: Porch posts or columns are important elements of historic porches. Porch posts can be either full height or short (set atop a masonry base). For replacement porch posts, the replacement must match the existing posts. Non-original posts may also be replaced if documentation exists that depicts the original post size, shape, and design. If no documentation exists, replacement posts must be simple in design.

Newel Post: Newel posts are the specialized posts used to support stair railings on historic porches. They should correspond to the other porch posts on thickness whether round or square.

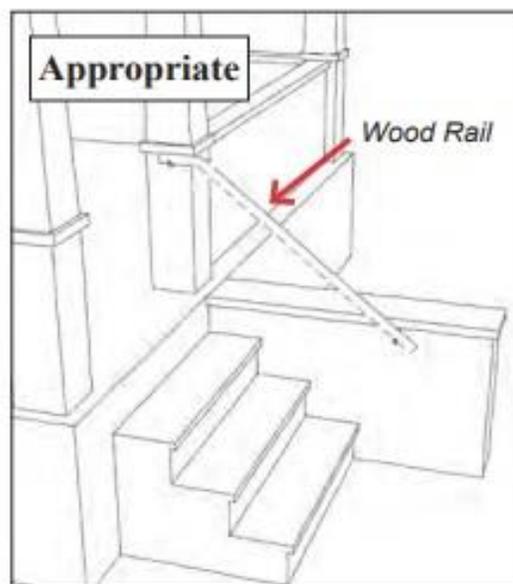
Railings/Balustrades: Railings are also an important element of historic properties. Historic railing materials and elements shall be retained and maintained. Should replacement become necessary, appropriate treatments for the primary components of porch railings are as follow:

1. Height: If a porch railing must be replaced, the height of the new railing shall match the historic railing height as determined by an existing historic railing or scars on the porch wall. If no evidence exists, the railing height should not exceed 30 inches. Note that this differs from the minimum height of 36 inches specified in today's building code. Should safety be an issue, alternative design solutions will be considered. Such solutions could include the use of trellises, window boxes and intermediate rails. An example of this might be installing the railing at a height of the historic railing, and then adding a simple supplemental rail at the code required height. This supplemental rail should also stop short of tying into posts.
2. Spindles: Spindles should match original spindles. If original spindles are not available, every effort should be made to find documentation of the originals. New spindles must match the existing style and details of the house. Spacing must meet building code requirements. Spindles must butt to top and bottom railings. Spindles nailed to sides of top or bottom railings are not appropriate.



If a 36" high rail is desired, add a simple supplemental rail and hold the ends away from the turned section of column.

Replacement rail should match historic rail height. If details on historic height are not available, height should be no more than 30".



*Diagrams from:  
Ann Arbor Historic District Commission,  
Historic District Design Guidelines*

3. Top Railing: Top railing must match original. If original is not available and no historic documentation is available, then a new top railing may consist of a 2x4 with beveled top and plain, rounded, or grooved sides.
4. Bottom Rail: The bottom railing should match the top railing (without grooved sides) and should be set between two and four inches above the porch deck.
5. Handrails on Steps: Since most historic porch steps never had handrails but are now required to do so by code, it is important to make them as unobtrusive as possible. Stair railings shall be installed at the proper height and proper materials shall be used. Where the porch is wood and has an original wood railing, new handrails for porch steps should be designed to match. If the wood railing is solid, plain 2x4 handrails extending over 4x4 newel posts are recommended. Where the porch rail is solid masonry and the historic steps are flanked by masonry sidewalls, metal brackets supporting a simple round, painted wood rail are appropriate. Whether this choice will work depends on the height of the flanking walls at the bottom and top.

Floor/Deck: The floor or deck of a porch is an important element of an historic porch. The traditional material for a porch floor is a 1x3 tongue and groove fir, laid perpendicular to the front wall of the house. The ends of the board may be trimmed with a small molding or left untrimmed. New flooring must have a closed butt joint. Installation of side-by-side 1x4 or 1x6 decking (pressure treated or other) is not an appropriate surface for a historic wood porch.

#### Composite Floor Materials

An increasingly popular alternative material for porch floors is a composite product made of recycled plastic and wood. This material is considered to be “green” in that most products are made from 50% recycled plastic (including plastic grocery bags) and 50% recycled wood products from woodworking operations such as sawdust and discarded pallets. These materials are manufactured into imitation wood planks that are then attached to a substructure much like a wood porch floor. This is a relatively new product, so its life expectancy is still unknown. The use of composite porch floors may be approved as an appropriate alternative material depending on limited or no visibility from the street.

#### Tip for Painting Porch Floor

If you need to paint new wood on your porch floor or step treads, do not use standard primer on these wear surfaces. Primer is soft to allow moisture to pass through and will not hold up to foot traffic. Wood does need something on the raw surface, do this instead:

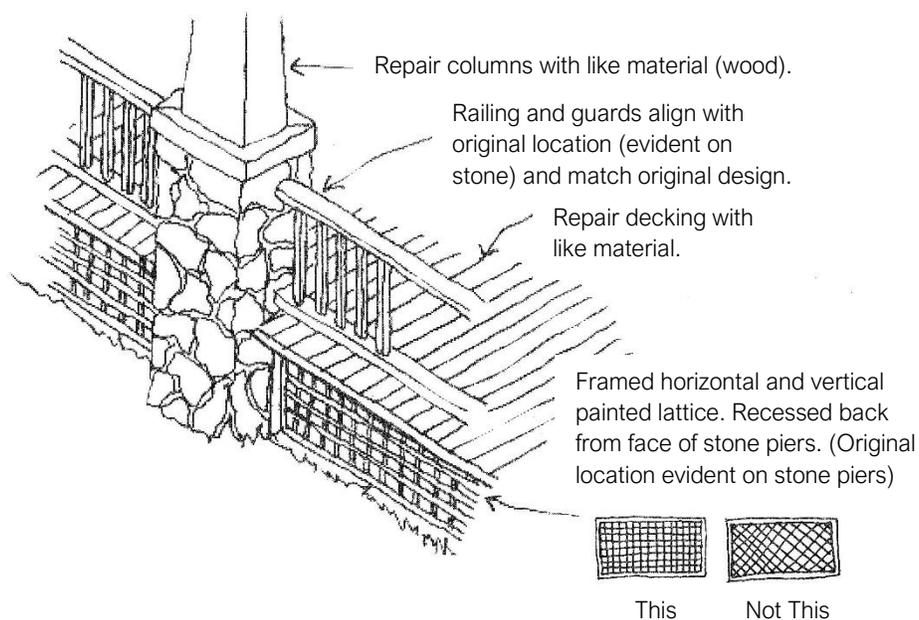
1. Choose your deck/floor paint (oil-based, alkyd or latex).
2. Mix a thinner version of this paint to use as a primer (3 parts topcoat paint and 1 part thinner (paint thinner for oil, water for latex).
3. Apply one or two coats primer and then as many coats topcoat as needed.

## Porch Steps

Historic porch steps should be maintained and when substantially deteriorated, replaced in a manner that replicates the historic steps in material, size, and detail. Elements and their appropriate treatment include:

1. Riser: Wood risers must be closed.
2. Tread: Wood treads may be one or two boards wide. Rounded tread nosings are recommended.
3. Concrete steps: Where concrete steps are not original to the property, new precast concrete steps are not recommended. Existing original concrete steps should be repaired with new concrete the same color and profile as the original.
4. Skirting: Typically, the area under the front porch with fascia board and framing around lattice panels. Lattice could be a horizontal/vertical grid or vertical narrow wood slats. Diagonal lattice is not appropriate.
5. Stringer: The structural members of a set of porch steps to which treads and risers are attached.

## Porch Skirting



The skirting beneath a porch and along the sides of steps is an important visual element and should be treated properly. Proper strategies for framing and screening porch skirting include:

1. Framing: Wood skirting should be framed with boards, generally 6 inches on top and at least 4 inches wide on the sides/corners and bottom.
2. Screening: Should match the original screening. If the original is not available to match, new screening may be traditional framed vertical wood lattice. Decoratively

cut vertical boards may be appropriate depending on architectural style. A horizontal/vertical wood lattice grid is also appropriate. Diagonal lattice is not appropriate. Vinyl lattice is not appropriate. Lattice may not be attached to the outer side of the framing boards. The sides of the steps may be enclosed with matching screening, or the screening may extend behind the steps to complete the enclosure.

### Upper Components

1. Porch Roof: The traditional roof for a full front porch is usually hip or shed (depending on overall style) with a shallow pitch. If decorative elements such as small gables or Mansard edges exist, they should be maintained. New elements should not be added.
2. Fascia: The fascia is the board along the side of the overhang and the roof that helps your roof appear finished.
3. Soffit: The soffit is the part of the overhang where your roof meets the siding, typically on the underside of the roof plane.
4. Pediment: The typically low-pitched triangular gable often on upper part of the front of a building in classical style, and often used above windows and doors.
5. Ceiling: The finished underside of a porch roof, frequently a wood paneled finish, coffered, or beadboard.

### Architectural Trim on Porches

The architectural trim, brackets, upper spindle work, decorative shingles, and moldings should be repaired rather than replaced. Any replacements should match the original in size, shape, and material. Conjectural features and/or architectural trim elements from other buildings that add a false sense of history should not be added to the porch.

### Screen Enclosures

Screen porch enclosures may be appropriate provided they are designed in a non-intrusive manner, and do not require the removal of any historic building fabric.

### **Replacement Columns**

Most replacement columns on the market are designed in round or square shapes and mimic classical “orders” such as Tuscan, Doric, Ionic and Corinthian. These classical “orders” can be understood as family-like groupings of architectural details established within western canon, primarily focused on the fundamental units of the column (post) and entablature (beam), as well as the compositional arrangement of *base*, *middle*, and *top*. Thus, they inform the appropriate use of features, moldings, and proportions for both the columns and associated entablatures carried above.

Replacement of columns and entablature details should begin with the study of which of the “orders” a composition may belong to, and/or observation of pre-existing details and proportions found on the building or similar local examples. In such cases, historical

fragments may belong to an “order” (ex. “Doric”) but may not strictly follow the proportioning rules associated with that “order” (ex. according to canon, a Doric column height shall be 8 times its base diameter, but many Doric columns observed within the historic urban fabric are thinner and are therefore to be understood as vernacular interpretations). In many cases, vernacular interpretations of the classical language were used in the composition and construction of historic porches, porticos, framing elements, etc.

In all cases involving classical or related vernacular columns, *entasis* shall be included. Entasis is the convex tapering of a rounded column beginning about one-third up the shaft. It is also important that the neck of the column be in flush vertical alignment with the beam above. When done correctly, the column’s capital details such as the abacus (square block resting at the top of a capital), should protrude beyond the plane of the column neck and the beam carried above.

### Fiberglass Porch Columns

During the past two decades, the use of fiberglass columns has increased in historic districts. Fiberglass is a material consisting of fine filaments of glass that are combined in yarn and woven into fabrics, used in masses as a thermal and acoustical insulator, or embedded in various resins to make doors, windows, and porch columns. Fiberglass is considered to be a “green” material since its manufacturing process requires less energy than other synthetic materials. Fiberglass columns will be considered on a case-by-case basis if the original columns are badly deteriorated, missing, or have been previously replaced. These types of porch columns should demonstrate the dimensions, proportions, texture, and appearance of wood columns.

### Vinyl Porch Columns

Columns of vinyl are now widely manufactured and come in a variety of designs. Vinyl is highly toxic in its manufacturing process and is not considered a “green” material. While vinyl can be molded easily into a variety of column shapes and forms, its exterior surface and texture has difficulty resembling wood. Vinyl columns typically have a bright sheen and do not have the muted surface or varied textures that historic wood columns have. The designs of many of these columns and other porch elements are often over- or under-sized compared to the dimensions of traditional wood columns. There is also concern over the amount of fading and stippling of vinyl surfaces due to exposure to UV rays over time. Vinyl columns are not appropriate for use in the historic district.