

Historic Huntsville Quarterly



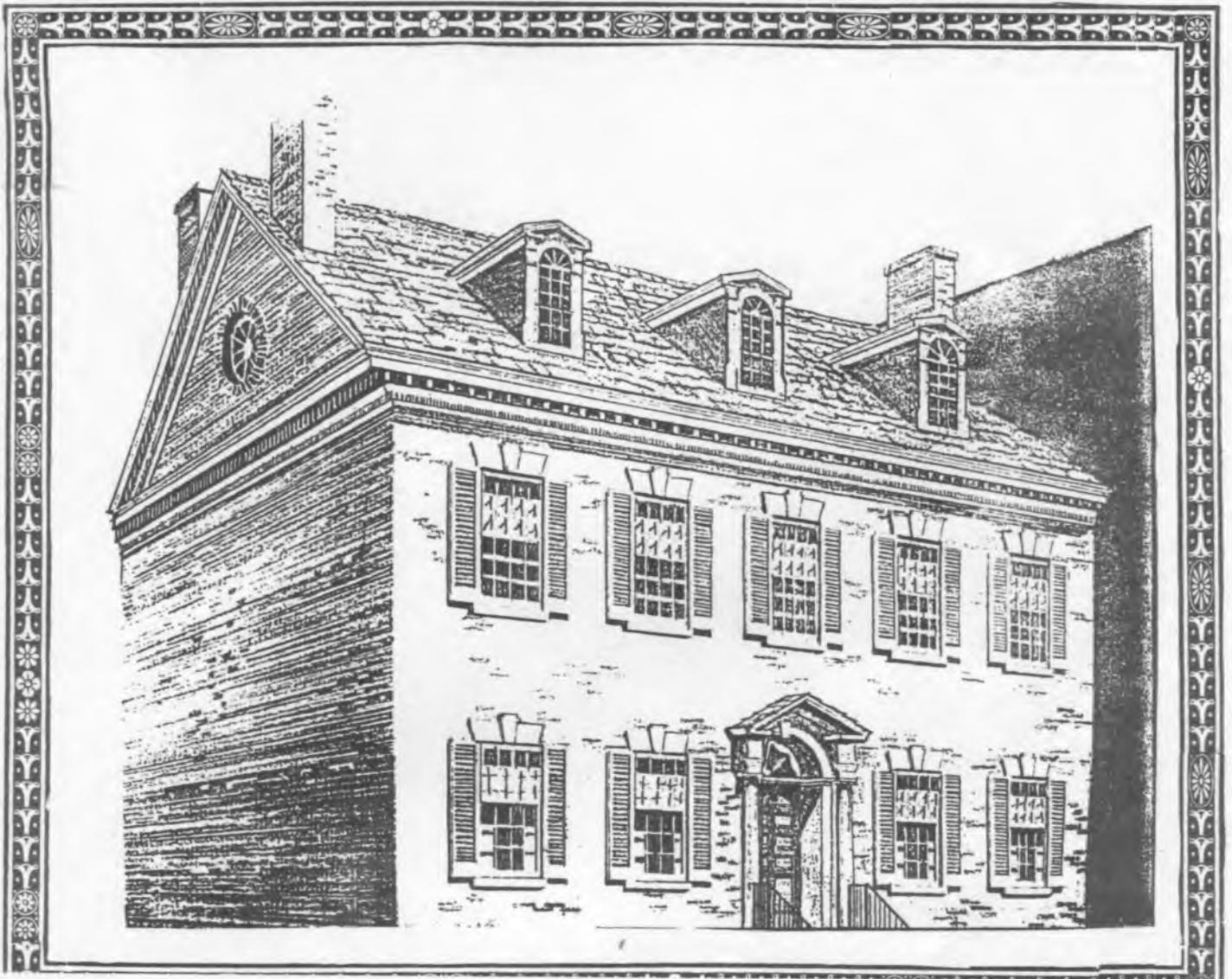
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When Henry Marks asked me to write an article for this issue of the Quarterly describing the design of our new office building I thought that such an article would require no more than half-an-hour's dictation, and, so, I readily agreed. After coming to grips with the task, however, it became apparent that it is not easy to describe why a particular design was adopted, and other concepts rejected. Consequently, the following represents a good-faith, but imperfect narrative description of the evolution of a particular design.

THE MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS: When my partners (Ralph Hornsby, David Blankenship, Zach Higgs) and I first considered acquiring our own office building, our law offices were located on the fourth floor of the Central Bank Building. We primarily were dissatisfied with the anonymity of that location. We were only four among about sixty lawyers in that building. We found that it often was difficult for clients to distinguish our office among the many law offices located in the building. On several occasions, clients looking for me mistakenly went to the office of Robert Sellers Smith, or Joe Smith. Thus, we began to feel very strongly that relocating our law offices to a building which we, alone, occupied was among the better ways to establish a professional identity distinct from other law firms. The financial consequences of such a move did not escape us either. We garnered no significant economic advantage from paying rent, whereas purchasing our own office space allowed us to build an investment equity for our retirement years

while still reaping immediate financial benefits by deducting interest payments from our individual income tax returns.

THE BUILDING SITE: With those thoughts in mind, we began to consider various options. We first considered the prospect of renovating an existing structure. Three buildings located on the south side of the Courthouse square, and owned by the Huntsville Housing Authority, were available for restoration. I attempted to persuade my partners to acquire one of the three, and to restore the building for our purposes. However, my partners rejected that concept because none of the buildings afforded any parking space contiguous to the building itself. We then began to canvas various building sites away from the center of downtown. All were rejected for reasons of personal convenience; our practice often requires us to be in the Madison County Courthouse: thus, we felt that it would be too inconvenient (especially in view of the new parking regulations in the downtown area) to have to travel to-and-from the square area several times each day.

After about two months of haggling over various existing buildings and construction sites, we found ourselves much in the same position as when we had begun: i. e., while we did not desire to remain in the Central Bank Building, none of us desired to move off the square. However, my partners really were not interested in renovating an existing building on the square. Therefore, that left for consideration only the east side of the

square, where a large plot of vacant land was available for development. After discussing the matter with officials of the Huntsville Housing Authority, we found that a parcel 42.5 feet wide by 100 feet in depth, situated adjacent to the I. Shiffman & Company Building, could be purchased from the Housing Authority for a reasonable price, provided that our proposed design for the building to be constructed on the site was acceptable to the Housing Authority Board of Directors.

THE DESIGN CONCEPT: As chairman of the Historic Huntsville Foundation, I strongly urged my partners that we design an office compatible with Huntsville's architectural traditions. They all agreed, but none of us was interested in simply copying the design of structures already on the square. Rather, in keeping with our original motivation, we wanted to establish a distinct identity which conveyed feelings of conservatism, tradition, strength and permanency. With those considerations as general guide posts, my partners asked me to be responsible for formulating an architectural design acceptable to the Huntsville Housing Authority. Shortly thereafter, an event almost unique in the annals of legal history occurred: my partners enthusiastically adopted the first design proposal. (It truly is rare that four lawyers agree without equivocation on anything.)

The concept for the building was taken from the Alexandria, Virginia home of the late United States Supreme Court Justice Hugo L. Black. Justice Black was a native Alabamian, born and reared in Clay County from

whence my family hails. My maternal grandfather attended school with Justice Black, and my maternal step-grandmother's first cousin was Justice Black's first law partner. Justice Black was the first public figure of whom I had any real awareness. While I was in Law School, I began collecting materials and recollections which family members and other Clay County natives had of Justice Black. When my wife and I vacationed in the Alexandria, Virginia area several years ago, we went to Justice Black's home on South Lee Street. Both of us were captivated by the simple beauty of the structure.

Taking the Black residence as a model (see the picture located elsewhere in this issue of the Quarterly), our architect, Phillip Aaberg, and I began to expand the design to fit the dimensions of the property we proposed to purchase, and to suggest a feeling that the use to which the structure was to be put would be professional in nature, rather than residential. We attempted to accomplish this by widening the building (making it five window widths, with the main entry located in the center of the building) and by emphasizing its vertical proportions, raising it one-half story off ground level. We also copied a doorway from another Alexandria, Virginia home (the "Lloyd House," built about 1793) which I thought was particularly impressive. The fluted key-block limestone lintels above each window, as well as the molded limestone sills below each window, also were taken from the "Lloyd House." (Incidentally, while visiting in the Lloyd House, located at 220 Washington

Street in Alexandria, General Robert E. Lee learned of his appointment to command the Army of Northern Virginia.) The combination of those elements, plus the professional imagination of Phillip Aaberg, produced the building as it now exists--a classic example of the Federal architectural style.

THE FEDERAL STYLE OF ARCHITECTURE:

It is difficult (especially for a layman, such as myself) to define coherently what is meant when the descriptive phrase, "Federal Style," is applied to a particular architectural design. What generally is undisputed is that the Federal Style was an early expression of the Neoclassical movement. "Neoclassicism" took place in Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century (1750-1800), and in America during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth (1775-1850). The source for this vital development in architecture in both Europe and America was a reappraisal and reappraisal of the classical architecture of Greece and Rome. The Neoclassical movement in architecture paralleled the emergence of the science of archaeology. The early excavations at Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Palmyra were the first major archaeological undertakings of the eighteenth century and all exerted considerable influence in the Neoclassical movement.

In general, the Neoclassical movement in American architecture has been divided by authorities into two distinct stylistic periods. The first is the post-colonial or, "The Federal Style." However, this terminology has come to be utilized so indiscriminately that it now is applied more to define a block of time than

a coherent style. Indeed, the terminology "Federal Style" has been made to include most American building occurring between approximately 1780 and 1820. Following this in point of time, the second accepted stylistic division of the American Neoclassical movement is the "Greek Revival." But, as in the case of "Federal Style," the term "Greek Revival" has been applied so indiscriminately that all buildings of the period which display the classical Greek orders are automatically swept up under its all-inclusive heading. Because of the indiscriminate manner which the two terms have tended to be applied, more recent scholars have suggested new terminology to define the various phases of the American Neoclassical movement. William H. Pierson, Jr., in his recent study, entitled American Buildings and Their Architects: The Colonial and Neoclassical Styles (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976), has argued that four, rather than two, distinct phases of the Neoclassical style emerged in American architecture. He has defined the four phases as the "Traditional Phase," the "Idealistic Phase," the "Rational Phase," and the "National Phase." The remainder of this article shall focus on the Traditional Phase, but with some mention also of the Idealistic Phase. In his study (which is excellent), Mr. Pierson has the following to say:

"The Traditional Phase of American Neoclassicism was both the earliest and the least aggressive. In its staunch conservatism it was, in fact, little more than a provincial transformation of the first phase of English Neoclassicism. At the same time, in its basic characteristics it did not represent a radical break

from the architecture of the late colonial era. Fundamental building types were modified only slightly, if at all, and those changes which did occur were primarily refinements in proportion and scale. The greatest innovations appeared in the interior decoration, where new motifs, many of them derived indirectly from ancient classical sources, were used with restrained elegance. It is this delicate and refined mode of design which we will identify as the Federal Style, and it is precisely because it represents a development from, rather than a revolt against, the architecture of the late colonial period that we have termed it the Traditional Phase of American neoclassicism." W. H. Pierson, Jr., ibid pages 211-212.

The Federal Style was the creation of an affluent mercantile aristocracy on the American eastern seaboard. After the American Revolution, the coastal cities became centers of a lively trade with the far reaches of the world, including India and China. Salem and Boston, Massachusetts, and Alexandria, Virginia were characteristic. American sailing ships and the merchants who guided their destiny brought to Salem, later to Boston, and still later to Alexandria an accumulation of wealth which had never been known in the colonial era. In fact, it was in Salem, Massachusetts in 1799 that the first fortune of one million dollars was recorded in American history. In the words of Professor Pierson:

"These powerful and affluent men were the patrons of the Federal Style. Through the complex involvements of international trade they were still in very close contact with England at

the same time that they were in competition with it. Although daring and original in their trading exploits, they remained cautious and conservative in the fulfillment of their cultural needs, and the English taste and many English social attitudes still shaped their way of life. Because of this the architecture which they commissioned and enjoyed had the same fundamental roots as that of the colonial period." W. H. Pierson, Jr., ibid page 215.

The affluent mercantile aristocracy of which Pierson writes were the hard-core of the Federalist political party, with which George Washington, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Chief Justice John Marshall generally are associated. While these men were strongly nationalistic in their conception of the form and functions of the American government, they were equally conservative in their tastes, bound to the mother country from which they had revolted by powerful cultural and economical ties. In the architecture of England they found the reassuring graces of a venerable tradition, and they had no great desire to depart from such cultural traditions.

Quite the opposite of the conservatism associated with the Federal Style was the architecture of Thomas Jefferson. "Thoroughly anti-British in his attitude toward architecture, and consciously seeking a mode of building symbolic of the new republic, Thomas Jefferson discovered what he considered an appropriate idiom in two non-English sources, the Neoclassical architecture of contemporary France, and the architecture of ancient Rome. From these he created an intensely personal style, indeed one

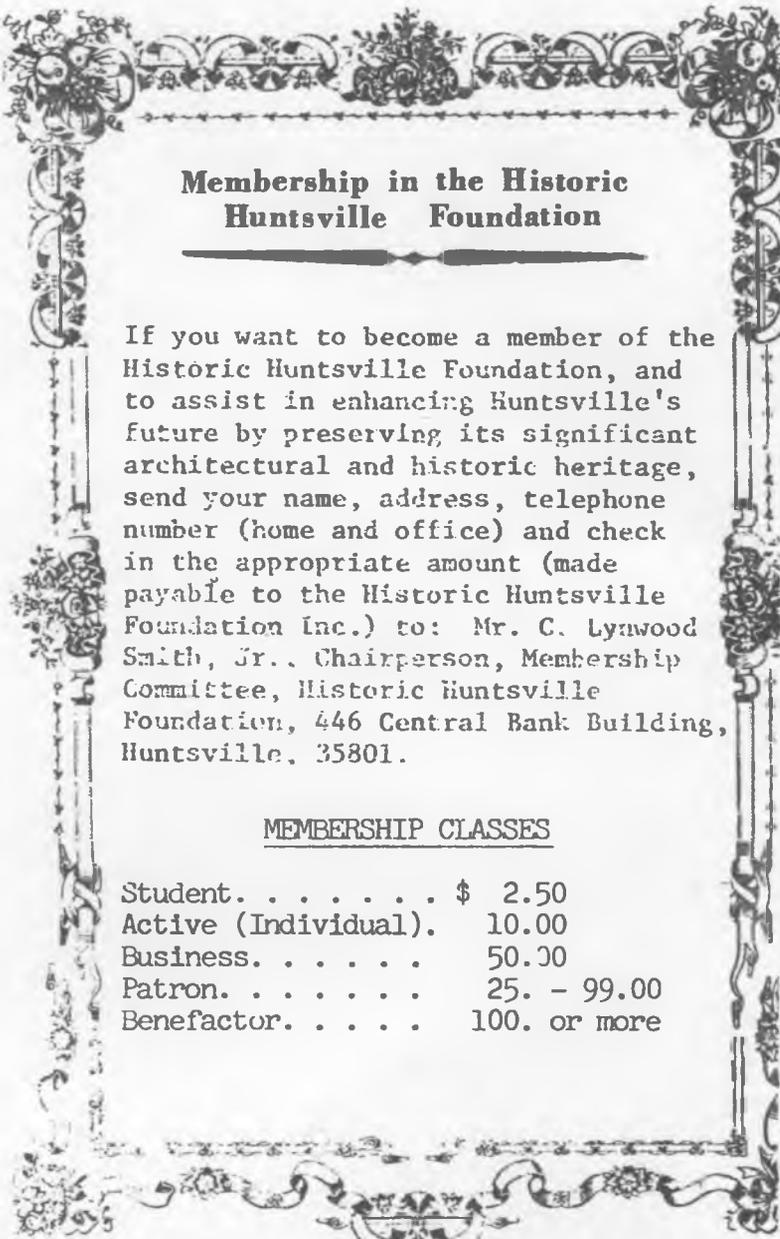
so reflective and so highly symbolic that few, if any, of his contemporaries were able to grasp its full significance. Rational at the same time that it was romantic, it remains one of the most brilliant creative outbursts of the entire Neoclassical movement. In its thoughtful, social and political implications it bears a direct relationship to the ideals and aspirations of the new republic and can therefore be defined as the Idealistic Phase of American Neoclassicism.

"In spite of its highly individual character, and precisely because of its expressive symbolism, Jefferson's architecture became in an abstract way the architecture of those radical idealists whose dreams of a free society had formed the theoretical spearhead of the Revolution. Their antagonism toward all things British led them, like Jefferson, to reject tradition and to seek in all walks of life new forms which would be expressive of the political and social ideals for which they had fought. For them the destiny of America lay in the vast potential of the unexplored, and thus, like Jefferson, they sought not only to construct a political state which would assure that destiny, but also, in Jefferson's words, 'to bring into action that mass of talents which lies buried in the poverty of every country, for want of the means of development, and thus give activity to a mass mind, which, in proportion to our population shall be the double or treble of what it is in most countries.' Such challenging ideals found their expression in Jefferson's own architecture, for it is one of those remarkable turns of history that Jefferson the idealist and statesman was also Jefferson the architect. More than any other man of his day,

Jefferson understood the larger functions of architecture in society and used it as a symbol of political and social values." W. H. Pierson, Jr., ibid pages 212-213.

Thus defined, the Federal architectural style proved to be entirely compatible with those feelings that all of us hoped to express symbolically in the construction of our office building: i. e., those feelings of conservatism, tradition, strength, and permanency. Moreover, the style is compatible with the architectural traditions of this city. George Steele, an architect prominent in Huntsville's early development, often designed homes in the Federal Style. Two classic examples are the Cabaniss-Roberts home (located at 603 Randolph Avenue) and the Steele-Gaines home (located at 519 Randolph Avenue). Both homes are parochial manifestations of the Federal Style which reached its apex in New England and Alexandria, Virginia. Both are characteristic of this city in their use of wooden lintels and sills above and below each window (instead of carved limestone), the absence of ornate cornices, and the use of rectilinear lights above the entry door rather than half-round or elliptical fanlights. Nonetheless, both homes are handsomely proportioned and unpretentious, and their impressively simple architectural statement is honestly the work of local hands.

Thus, while our office introduces to Huntsville the decorative elaboration of the Federal Style as first defined on the eastern seaboard, the building is not obtrusive. Rather, it is compatible with Huntsville's history and, hopefully, a welcome addition to the downtown development.

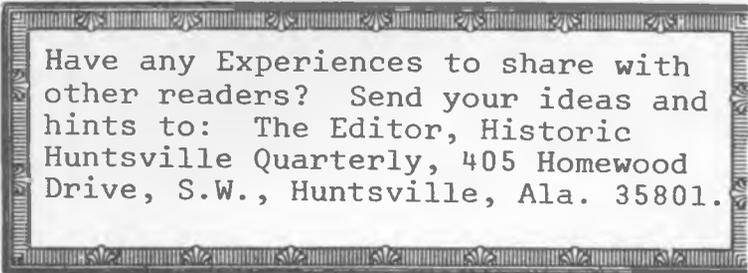


Membership in the Historic Huntsville Foundation

If you want to become a member of the Historic Huntsville Foundation, and to assist in enhancing Huntsville's future by preserving its significant architectural and historic heritage, send your name, address, telephone number (home and office) and check in the appropriate amount (made payable to the Historic Huntsville Foundation Inc.) to: Mr. C. Lyawood Smith, Jr., Chairperson, Membership Committee, Historic Huntsville Foundation, 446 Central Bank Building, Huntsville, 35801.

MEMBERSHIP CLASSES

Student.	\$ 2.50
Active (Individual).	10.00
Business.	50.00
Patron.	25. - 99.00
Benefactor.	100. or more



Have any Experiences to share with other readers? Send your ideas and hints to: The Editor, Historic Huntsville Quarterly, 405 Homewood Drive, S.W., Huntsville, Ala. 35801.

EDITOR'S REPORT

Several interesting events have occurred in Huntsville since the beginning of the year. Most encouraging to me is the tremendous response of the people of the Tennessee Valley and Huntsville to the Randolph Street Fair. The opening of homes on Randolph Street to the public has shown the potential we always thought Huntsville had to become a very important factor in the preservation of our historic and architectural heritage.

In the next few issues we plan to present articles written by people who have so painstakingly renovated their homes on Randolph Street and have revitalized this part of Huntsville.

We also will attempt to present articles about several industrial and commercial buildings in Huntsville, buildings that have long and colorful histories, but have been neglected by historians and others interested in our past.



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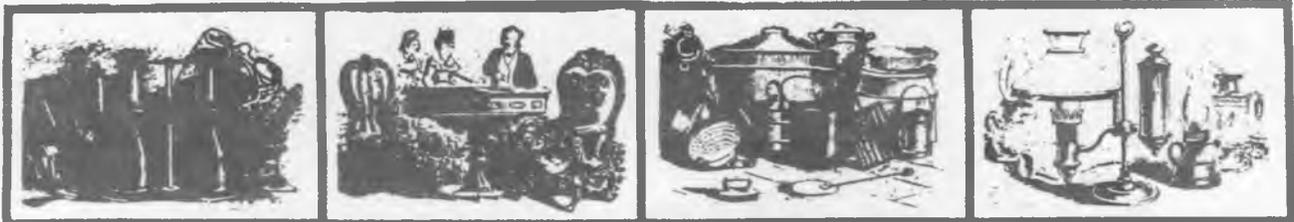
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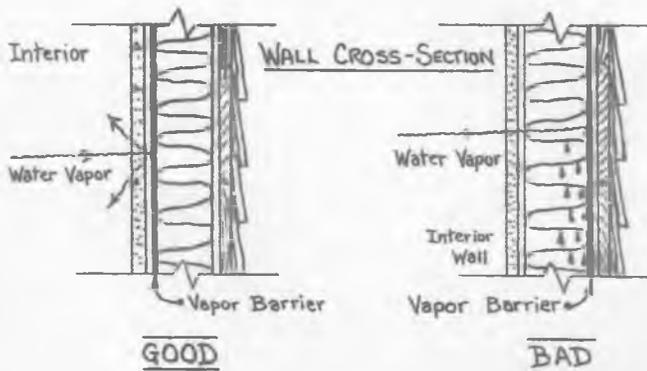
Insulation And The Old House

By William N. Papian, P.E.
 Claxton Walker & Associates



MOST PROBLEMS CAUSED by improperly installed insulation stem from a poor understanding of the condensation factor. Moisture-laden air tends to travel to the outside through walls and ceilings. Kitchens, bathrooms and laundries throw off an amazing amount of water vapor—all of which has to go someplace. In a drafty old house, there are plenty of cracks and crevices that allow the water to escape harmlessly. If you suddenly turn around and tightly seal and insulate every crack, you may generate serious rot and paint peeling problems that you never had before. The solution is to make sure that all water-generating centers have adequate ventilation—and that you understand the principles of vapor barriers.

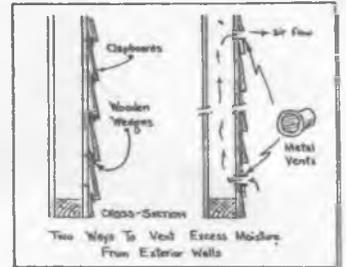
CONDENSATION PROBLEMS occur in cold weather. As moisture-laden warm air travels through walls, it will soon drop below the dew point and some of the moisture will start condensing out—almost always on the first hard surface it meets. The resulting dampness inside the wall can reduce insulation values and promote rot.



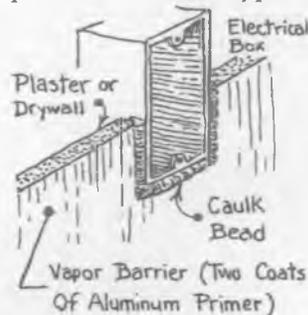
VAPOR BARRIERS are used to prevent moisture from getting inside the partitions in the first place. Vapor barriers should always be placed on the warm side of the insulation—NEVER on the cold side. For example, if you are pouring insulation in the attic floor, lay down a vapor barrier first. (Thin plastic sheeting is adequate.) With blanket insulations, be certain to place the kraft paper or aluminum-foil side toward the inside of the house.

IN SOME CASES—such as blowing insulation into a side wall—it is impossible to install a

vapor barrier. In this case, you had better be sure the exterior wall is reasonably porous to air. Most clapboard exteriors are sufficiently porous. If events show that additional ventilation is needed, small wooden wedges can be inserted under the clapboards. In severe cases, metal vents can be used to provide the additional air flow needed to carry the water vapor away harmlessly.



WHEN LOOSE FILL insulation has been used in side walls, it is also a good idea to make sure that the interior surfaces of the walls are as vapor-resistant as possible. This means spackling all cracks—especially those around window frames, baseboards, etc. Any electrical boxes in the outer walls should be carefully caulked to seal the space between the metal and the plaster. This type of sealing might seem unnecessary, but tests



have shown that there is enough moisture loss through the perimeter of an outlet box to form a large ball of frost on the back face during extended cold periods. When this frost melts as the weather warms up, the water released can damage exterior paint films and promote rot inside the wall. In cold climates, sealing of the outlet boxes in insulated walls is especially important in rooms that generate a lot of water vapor, such as the bath and kitchen.

THE SAME PRINCIPLES used in sealing outlet boxes should be applied to all openings in an insulated outside wall. Such openings include exhaust fans in bath or kitchen, air registers and plumbing openings. (Even if your side walls aren't insulated, you should consider sealing these apertures just to cut down on heat loss.)

ADDITIONAL MOISTURE RESISTANCE can be added to side walls with blown-in insulation by



Remedies For 'Dark, Ugly' Woodwork

By Clem Labine

A COMMON OLD-HOUSE COMPLAINT: "I can't stand that dark woodwork. What should I do?" Most people turn automatically to paint remover. But this can be a needlessly messy—and expensive—solution. Chances are that there is a serviceable finish obscured beneath many layers of wax, grime and shellac. Often, this finish can be revived with a lot less effort than completely stripping and refinishing.

IN PARTICULAR, late 19th century and turn-of-the-century houses often have paneling and woodwork of walnut, mahogany and oak that looks practically black—but which can be revived with minimum effort.

ABOVE ALL, don't plunge in and strip everything off, automatically assuming that the wood will look better "natural." In many cases, a dark finish was applied originally...sometimes because dark woodwork was integral to the design of the house...and sometimes to disguise the fact that cheap, uninteresting woods had been used for the woodwork. More than one person has stripped off dark ugly finish...only to find that they are left with light ugly wood.

THE FIRST RULE is test. There are a variety of revivers you can use. So find the least conspicuous area of woodwork and run a series of test procedures...starting with the easiest and working up to the more drastic and time-consuming.

IF YOU ARE WORKING with the original finish, in all probability it is shellac rather than varnish. Unlike varnish, shellac is readily dissolved by several mild solvents, which means that there are several fairly easy tricks short of total stripping that will rescue the original finish.

FREQUENTLY, the dark color is a combination of the shellac (which darkens with age) plus pigment that was sometimes added to give the finish a darker color. By selectively removing a portion of the finish, you may be able to arrive at a color you like.

● **TRY CLEANING** first. Mineral spirits (benzine) or turpentine will remove any of the heavy wax build-up. Use plenty of rags or paper towels to wipe the surface. If the rags come off dirty, you are removing considerable surface accumulation. This will leave the surface dull looking. If the color is promising, let the surface dry, and then apply a thin coat of lemon oil or Butcher's wax.

● **TRY STRONGER** cleaners next—cleaners that will dissolve a portion of the finish. These include proprietary cleaners like Fantastik or full-strength Top Job. Or you can make your own strong cleaner by dissolving 1 lb. of washing soda (sal soda) in a gallon of hot water. Use rubber gloves, and rub down the woodwork with this solution and 2/0 steel wool. Ammonia will also dissolve shellac.

RUB WITH THE CLEANERS until the wood is a shade you like. Then finish as above.

● **NEXT COME THE CHEMICAL SOLVENTS.** There are several different formulas you can try:

- ▶ 15% (by volume) lacquer thinner in mineral spirits;
- ▶ 50-50 mixture of lacquer thinner and denatured alcohol;
- ▶ Pure denatured alcohol.

START WITH the first mixture because it will take off the least amount of finish. Apply with fine 3/0 steel wool, wetting surface and changing pads as necessary. The appearance of the surface while wet with the solvent is the look it will have when the final coat of wax or lemon oil is applied. When you have taken off enough of the old finish and have the look you want, wash the surface with rags saturated with benzine or mineral spirits.

IF YOU WANT A HARDER FINISH on the woodwork than that provided by lemon oil or wax, you can apply a satin finish varnish, or a hard oil finish such as that provided by Minwax Antique Oil or tung oil.

CAUTION: Never apply wax over a surface that has been treated with lemon oil. Unlike tung oil or linseed oil, lemon oil doesn't dry. So the wax will dissolve in the lemon oil and make a gummy mess. Likewise, don't apply lemon oil to a surface that has been waxed. If this disaster does occur, the resulting glop can be removed with mineral spirits or turpentine.

QUALLY AFTER all of the above cleaning and reviving procedures have been tried should you move on to the ultimate step of removing all the old finish with paint & varnish remover. Sometimes woodwork that has been stripped entirely of its dark old finish looks very dull and lifeless...leaving the homeowner disappointed—and tired and poorer to boot. ■■



ANNOUNCEMENTS

There will be the ANNUAL ELECTION
OF OFFICERS MEETING on Sunday,
October 12, 1976, at 2:00 p.m., at The
Steamboat Gothic House.

FROM:

**The Historic Huntsville Foundation, Inc.
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