



## PAINT IN 18<sup>th</sup>-CENTURY NEWPORT

by Robert Foley, Director of Preservation, Newport Restoration Foundation

The last time I wrote about paint in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was a basic overview. This time around I will address more detail concerning Newport, in particular how and where some of the pigments came about.

It is important to recall that paint of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century was made from three basic ingredients – linseed oil as the vehicle, pigments as the colorants and turpentine as a dryer. These ingredients combined create what we call oil paint. It was used primarily for the exterior of a building and assuredly in Newport for the painting of ships. Oil was also used on interiors, but not exclusively since water and milk base paints were used on interiors where oil's resistance to weather was not needed.

Paint was purchased in component parts and mixed on the job. Thus it was used by the day because it would 'skin over' and deteriorate in terms of usefulness rather rapidly. I'm sure most of us have disposed of oil paint that has gone solid in the can, the 18<sup>th</sup> century paint achieved solidity much quicker particularly without tight sealing mechanisms. The re-sealable can, that we take so much for granted, didn't exist until the time of the Civil War – 1864.

Where were the paint shops in 18<sup>th</sup> century Newport? The Newport Restoration Foundation has done considerable research over the last ten years on this subject, mainly in the collection of Newport Mercury newspapers at the Newport Historical Society. We found some thirty different names mentioned editorially and more commonly in advertisements that dealt with the components of the paint trade from 1758 – the earliest editions available – to 1819. Many of the names were repeated in different forms over the years. For instance John Cahoone advertisements of 1794 became John Cahoone & Sons in 1799. There were four different Tweedys, alone and in combinations, advertising paint materials from 1764 to 1773.

An interesting side note is that John Cahoone and Stephen Yates built a double house (a somewhat common type of building in 18<sup>th</sup> century Newport) in 1763 on Green Street. Cahoone was a painter and also ran a paint shop that was frequently advertised. Yates was listed as a painter. Deed research of the area shows that Cahoone owned property from the Green Street house to Thames Street property. This may have been the location of his shop. His ads reference the location being across from 'the Golden Eagle sign'. These directions were probably very effective at the time, but now 215 years on, that Golden Eagle sign and business are long gone and no street numbers were mentioned in the ads. Yet it stands to reason –until further research proves differently - that Cahoone had a tight compound of home and shop in the Green and Thames Street area.

There were at least some thirty shops dealing in the materials of the paint trade from 1758 to 1819. What were they selling? The Mercury advertisements list pigments, brushes, oils, gold leaf and a myriad of other items and services. What isn't clear is what were specific to house and ship painting versus those elements that were primarily for artist and sign makers. Obviously gold or silver leaf was not meant for exterior house surfaces, but less clear are some of the pigments offered.

Today whatever pigments or colorants are added to your gallon of base paint are manufactured and standardized. Their cost is built into the paint can price. One costs about the same as another. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century pigments varied considerably in price depending on the materials and process to produce a useable pigment. The paint colors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were, 1) local in many ways and 2) very inconsistent.

Our research quantified the number of times particular pigments appeared in advertisements over the period of 1760 to 1819. Many colors appear just one time while at the other end of the range are Spanish Brown, red lead and white lead which appear in nearly every ad for the period. Red and white lead affected the color of paints, but was primarily used as additive to fortify the mix.

Spanish Brown is the ubiquitous color of colonial America and England as well. It was cheap, probably the cheapest available – dirt cheap because it is dirt. Robert Dossie in the 1758 London edition of his book Handmaid to the Arts comments on Spanish Brown thusly, “It was probably, from its name, originally derived from abroad and was then most likely of a finer kind; but what is now used is produced of our own country, being dug up in several parts of England.” It did not take the colonists long to follow the London paint merchants lead by digging local dirt with iron oxide content and calling it Spanish Brown. Spanish Brown turned out in a variety of colors from burnt orange through reds and into browns. The exact shade didn't seem to matter, cost did. It was used as primer or “first coat” in the terms of the times. It was used on out buildings and barns as well as houses. The pigment was made by grinding the earth into a very fine powered consistency that would then be added to the linseed oil and turpentine – the content of the dirt and the amount used ultimately determined the color.

Made pigments were another ugly noxious story. Take the manufacture of white lead. Lead sheets were rolled loosely and inserted into tall clay pots. Horse urine then filled the pots. Cow manure was packed around the pots and the wood frame containing the mixture was covered to contain and concentrate the resulting vapors. In due time – days - the cover was removed, the lead sheets removed and unrolled revealing white flakes or “rust” as it was termed. This material was scraped off by some poor soul and then again ground into a powdered form. Similar processes were in place for verdigris or green, which used copper in place of lead, and for several other “made” pigments as opposed to the earth pigment, or natural occurring material, that simply needed grinding.

To determine an original color in the 1960s and earlier, paint was scraped down to the first layer, a wet finger was wiped across it to heighten the color and that was your original color. This was the period when 'colonial' was flat finishes and primarily earthy colors. What was not known or understood fully then was that these paint layers had undergone years of change involving time, light and chemical changes prompted in some cases by successive layers of paint and the color seen was not necessarily the color applied 200 years earlier.

Today the "true" colors of the past are determined through a very technical process of paint analysis using very sophisticated and powerful microscopes to determine the number of layers and the type of materials used (in many cases), ultimately leading to THE color. Or, at least the color is the best we know today until science and technology make another leap in the chase to come up with the exact color a house was painted in the past.

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