



PAINT THE HOUSE

by Robert Foley, Director of Preservation, Newport Restoration Foundation

Today we often agonize over the color to paint our houses. What was the original color, what is appropriate for the style, what do I like? Light, dark, the choices are truly infinite today. When your color choice is finally made, it's then a trip to the paint store that results in gallons of perfect paint in the exact color. And, if you are short a gallon, the paint store pulls out a formula and mixes a gallon to the exact color.

What of paint in the 18th and early 19th centuries? First it was considered a means of protecting and preserving the material fabric of a house. The decorative aspect – color – was less important in this early period. That is not to say color was of no concern within the limitations of the time.

Paint in this early period was made up of linseed oil, the vehicle; pigment, the colorant; turpentine, as a dryer and often red or white lead as a strengthening agent. Shops sold the stuff of paint throughout the 18th century - there were numerous businesses in Newport that advertised oil, pigments and other accoutrements of paint. NRF has examined the *Newport Mercury* newspapers from about 1750 to 1815 for advertisements and mentions of paint. The information was put into categories such as the pigments mentioned; the number of times particular pigments were advertised and the dates a pigment first appears. This data creates an interesting picture of paint in 18th century Newport and may be the material of another article.

The ingredients were imported primarily from London. Linseed oil came in large wooden casks; pigments, simple and complex, were available ground to a fine powder-like consistency. The ingredients were mixed on the job in a quantity that could be used in a day's time. The reason for the daily mix is one of those things hardly considered from our perspective – there were no cheap metal re-sealable containers. The mixed paint had to be applied before it dried in the pot. Cheap re-sealable tin cans didn't exist until the period of the Civil War. Once the paint can was available it allowed for the paint industry as we have come to know it – centralized manufacture, repeatable consistency of product and color, plus mass distribution.

One area of concern to us today is trying to determine the appropriate color for a building of a specific date. It can be done through paint analysis if there is fabric – painted boards – that are original to the build date. This process involves taking several small samples of paint down to the wood, and examining it with an electron microscope. The first layer next to the wood is believed to be the first color applied. The accuracy depends a great deal on the experience of the professional doing the work. Is that first layer a primer or the first real color on the building?

“Historic Color” charts from paint manufacturers are some help, but they often don't reveal where the color was found or what period the color applies to. Hopefully this short piece will lead to a follow up with more detail on the colors and pigments available in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

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