

Best Practices for Historic Home Preservation: A Wilmington, MA Guide

Wilmington Historical Commission, updated 5/13/2022

- Renovations to historic homes in Wilmington, MA are required to follow current building and electrical code. Modernization of systems can be costly, and in some cases detrimental to the historic details of the building.
- Buildings on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) may benefit from tax incentives or grants for the sake of protection and preservation of the historicity of the property, but the registry is mostly honorary in nature.
- Some homes have preservation restrictions (PR), which are voluntary legal agreements to protect the local historic or cultural resource. A preservation restriction is filed at the registry of deeds and runs with the land, typically restricting demolition or alteration of significant historical features, and exterior architectural styling. PRs include Grantor's Covenants, which describe the review process if any exterior alterations are considered.

The following best practices should be observed insofar as you are able, when renovating (whether restoring or rehabilitating) a historic home.

Restoring: returning the exterior and interior of the structure to its original appearance (at a particular period)

Rehabilitating: renovating the home to make it functional for contemporary living, complete with modern amenities

Preview and Planning Stage:

1. Living in an old house is a commitment– it may not come with some of the creature comforts.
2. Water damage is the enemy–it invites bugs and rot (prioritize sill plate and roof elements).
3. Assemble a team to help you– a historian, contractor and inspector can help you prioritize what to do.
4. On a budget? Start small– better to buy quality materials and renovate less.
5. Be smart about your investment– be careful to not over-invest in homes that need lots of renovations.
6. Start with the roof, windows, and masonry– first stages should be practical rather than aesthetic.
7. Technology is your friend– consider integrating period details and splitting systems, if needed.
8. Embrace the non-threatening quirks– know what to sacrifice and what to preserve.

Steps for Restoring:

1. Study the home's history, and learn its story
2. Study the design and craftsmanship of the structure
3. Stay true to the period, even when it comes to materials
4. Modern upgrades may be essential, but proceed with care
5. Stay true to the home's character, don't falsify the history

Design/Aesthetic Principles:

1. Consider the right exterior colors
2. Create the illusion of space
3. Accentuate unique features and details
4. Update the kitchen
5. Mix old with new (find modern furniture and decorations that "echo" the earlier period)
6. Think outside of the given design period (strike a balance without betraying it)
7. Embrace the unique.

References:

1. <https://www.shermanbridge.com/blog/restoring-old-historic-property/>
2. <https://archive.curbed.com/2017/6/8/15762608/old-house-reno-restore-tips>
3. <https://www.builddirect.com/blog/6-ways-to-update-a-historic-home/>
4. <https://www.communitypreservation.org/historic-restrictions>

NRHP Name	Picture	Date and Registry#	Location
Boutell-Hathorn House		October 27, 2004 (#04001210)	280 Woburn St.  42°33'54"N 71°08'47"W
Buck's Corner Historic District		November 21, 2003 (#03001209)	216 Wildwood St., 580,584,588,590,602,603, 604 Woburn St.  42°32'52"N 71°09'05"W
Ephraim Buck House		March 9, 1990 (#90000189)	216 Wildwood St.  42°32'49"N 71°09'06"W
Butters-Avery House		July 3, 2010 (#10000413)	165 Chestnut St.  42°31'57"N 71°10'34"W
Church Street Historic District		November 21, 2003 (#03001175)	72–150 and 117–135 Church St., 4 Central St.  42°33'09"N 71°10'07"W
Gowing-Sheldon Historic District		November 21, 2003 (#03001176)	642 and 643 Woburn St.  42°32'30"N 71°09'01"W
Harnden Tavern		April 8, 1975 (#75000293)	430 Salem St.  42°34'46"N 71°08'52"W
High Street Historic District		November 21, 2003 (#03001177)	Even nos. 8–72 High St. except 20A and 20R, plus nos. 31, 47, 57 and 67.  42°34'21"N 71°09'11"W
West Schoolhouse		February 21, 1990 (#90000144)	141 Shawsheen Ave.  42°33'22"N 71°11'25"W
Wilmington Centre Village Historic District		April 8, 1992 (#92000246)	Roughly Middlesex Dr. and Church St. from Adams St. to Wildwood Cemetery  42°33'22"N 71°09'52"W