



CITY OF PORTSMOUTH

Historic District Commission

Guidelines for Porches, Stoops & Decks



An entrance porch can evoke a sense of grandeur and provide a welcoming feature for visitors.

These *Guidelines* were developed in conjunction with the City of Portsmouth's Historic District Commission (HDC) and the Planning Department. Please review this information during the early stages of planning a project. Familiarity with this material can assist in moving a project quickly through the approval process, saving applicants both time and money.

In its review, the HDC considers a property's classification, recommending the greatest historic authenticity at focal buildings, with more flexibility at contributing structures, and the most at non-contributing properties. The HDC Staff in the Planning Department is available to provide informal informational meetings with potential applicants who are considering improvements to their properties.

Additional *Guidelines* addressing other historic building topics are available at City Hall and on the Commission's website at www.planportsmouth.com/historicdistrictcommission. For more information, to clarify whether a proposed project requires HDC review, or to obtain permit applications, please call the Planning Department at (603) 610-7216.

PORCHES & STOOPS

The rich architectural variety of Portsmouth is distinguished by its collection of porches and stoops. Historically, porches were an outside room where residents could find a sheltered transition into their homes, exterior living space, and a place to enjoy a cool breeze and converse with neighbors. When they were constructed, the form, details and decorative elements were often intended to complement the style of the house.

Porches are one of the most visible house elements and play a significant role in the appearance of the house and the streetscape. They can act as an extension of a home, providing a welcome for visitors. Unfortunately, porches today can be one of the most altered components of a building, either because they are not properly maintained or they are viewed as potential enclosed indoor space.

With most of Portsmouth's buildings located adjacent to the sidewalk or street, many of the city's historic buildings do not have front porches at their façade, but instead have steps, also known as stoops, leading directly to a small landing or the entrance door. In many cases, these homes will often include a porch at a rear or side elevation.



Unlike porches, which were designed as an integral component of a building, decks are generally made from stock lumber and are not stylistically integrated with historic buildings. As a result, their visibility should be limited from the public right-of-way.

DECKS

In the late-20th century, decks became a more prevalent constructed form of outdoor space, beginning with decks located above the ground, and later, roof decks on top of buildings. Decks are typically wood-frame construction, using stock lumber and components that are generally stained or sealed rather than painted. One of the critical differences between a deck and a porch is that a porch is integrated into the overall design of a building, while a deck, although attached, is stylistically different. Because of the stylistic difference, they are not appropriate at focal buildings, and must be carefully considered at all other locations, relative to their visibility from the public right-of-way. (Refer to *Roof Decks, Guidelines for Roofing*, page 04-7.)

PORCH COMPONENTS



PORCH & STOOP MAINTENANCE

Because of the importance porches play in the perception of historic buildings and streetscapes, original materials and details should be preserved. Typically, areas covered by a porch roof tend to require less maintenance; however, steps, railings and roofs are usually exposed to the weather and might require additional maintenance. Similarly, stoops that are exposed to the elements will also require a higher level of maintenance.

One of the best ways to preserve wood porch features is regular painting. If a component is deteriorating, repair or replacement in kind is recommended as part of the porch's regular maintenance.

Porch & Stoop Repair Information

Since many of the components of porches and stoops are discussed in depth in other *Guideline* brochures, including roofing, foundations and support piers, it might be helpful to consult the following to address specific repair needs:

- *Guidelines for Roofing*
- *Guidelines for Exterior Woodwork*
- *Guidelines for Masonry & Stucco*

DECK MAINTENANCE

Similar to porches, wood decks also require maintenance. Deck maintenance should include checking for loose boards and nails as well as ensuring that railings are secure, particularly for raised decks. In addition, property owners are recommended to apply a sealer annually, to prevent splintering and discoloration, prolonging the deck's life.

EVIDENCE OF PRIOR PORCHES

It is important that documentation be found when replacing a missing porch. This can be physical evidence that a porch was present or documentation that shows or describes a porch, such as:

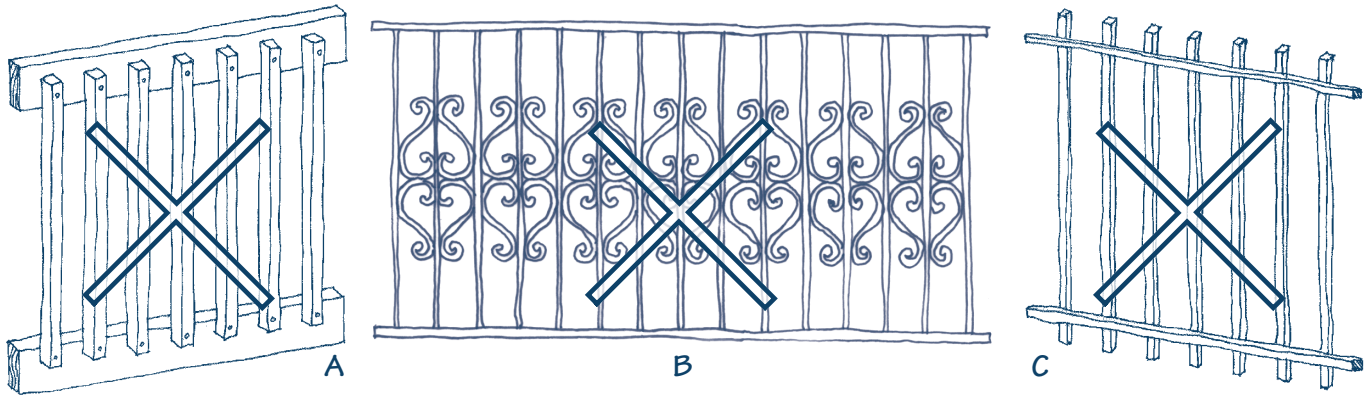
- Visible building evidence (such as an outline) on the wall or trim from roofs, posts or railings, evidence of nailing patterns on siding, repairs to masonry walls and evidence of former porch foundations in the landscape
- Historic photos, drawings or maps and original components that may be visible from attics or garages
- Comparable porches on neighboring buildings of similar type, design, style and date of construction

BALCONIES

In Portsmouth, the majority of balconies are constructed at new, large-scale, multi-family buildings and commercial buildings, and represent a critical element in the overall architectural design. For additional information, refer to *Architectural Elements & Projections, Guidelines for Commercial Storefronts & Infill*, page 12-7.

PATIOS

Unlike porches or decks which are typically wood construction raised above the ground level, patios are paved areas at or slightly above the height of the ground level, constructed of stone, brick, cast stone or concrete. For additional information, refer to *Paving, Guidelines for Site Elements and Streetscapes*, page 09-3.



The HDC does not approve requests for a wood "deck" balustrade (A), applied decorative scrolled metal ornament balustrade (B) or a balustrade composed of metal pickets welded to metal bars (C).

BALUSTRADES

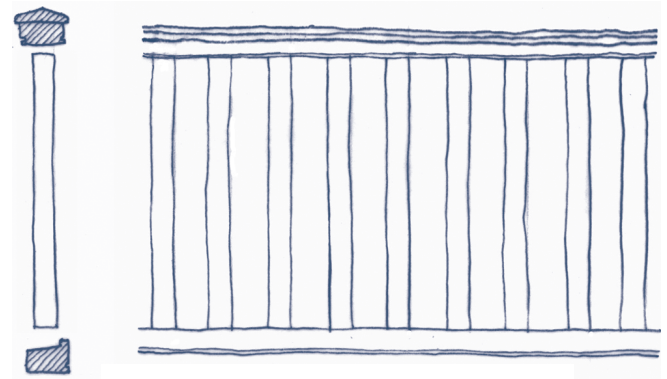
A balustrade is a railing with upper and lower horizontal members, known as rails, and vertical balusters of wood or metal. A replacement balustrade should match the overall style and character of the building.



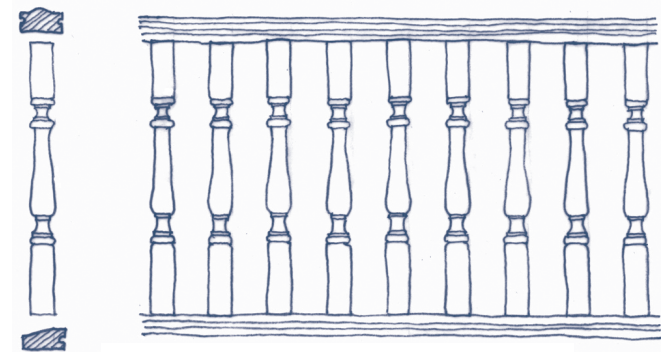
A simple, unobtrusive, metal rail was added to the granite steps to provide secure access to the door.

ACCESSIBILITY

Providing an accessible entrance to historic homes can be a challenge. The HDC is available to work with applicants to identify options that allow required access while minimizing the impact on historic building features and character. (Refer to *Modern Landscape Features, Equipment & Small Structures; Guidelines for Site Elements & Streetscapes*, page 09-4.)



Square Post Balustrade



Victorian Turned Balustrade



These are a variety of different styles for railings and balustrades, samples of which are illustrated above. Turned wood balustrades are often found at porches. When the height of historic railings does not meet current code requirements, property owners are encouraged to retain historic railings and add a secondary rail above.

HDC CRITERIA FOR PORCH, STOOP & DECK REVIEW

When evaluating a proposed repair, replacement or installation of a porch or stoop, the HDC's goal is to preserve the integrity of the remaining historic fabric in Portsmouth's Historic District to ensure continued access to this shared heritage. One of the major factors in the review process is the property's historical and/or architectural value as determined by the historic designation. The more significant the property, the more critical its authenticity.

- **Focal Properties** — Maintain the highest historic integrity with restoration of historic porch or stoop or replacement with matching elements throughout
- **Contributing Properties** — Restoration of historic porch or stoop encouraged, particularly at street-facing façades, more flexibility is possible at secondary side or rear elevations with limited visibility from the street
- **Non-Contributing Properties** — Restoration of historic porch or stoop is encouraged, with greater possibility for flexibility concerning alternate materials

When is HDC Review Not Required?

A Certificate of Approval is not required for:

- Regular routine maintenance of a porch, stoop or deck

Porches & Stoops

The HDC encourages:

- Painting porches and stoops regularly to preserve wood in a color and finish to complement their architectural characteristics (Refer to Exterior Paint, Guidelines for Exterior Maintenance, page 03-14 and *Guidelines for Architectural Styles*)
- Replacing only the original elements that cannot be repaired using elements of the same material, size, profile and other visual characteristics — In some instances, such as columns and posts, the base can be replaced at a fraction of the cost of replacing an entire column or post
- Replacing missing or deteriorated materials with similar new materials — Avoid replacement of a wood railing with a metal or vinyl railing system
- Repairing damaged elements to match historic appearance using appropriate repair techniques for that material (Refer to *Porch & Stoop Maintenance*, page 06-2)
- Maintaining masonry at porch piers — Mortar loss at brick piers is a common problem
- Painting to complement the architectural characteristics of the building — Painting preserves wood and protects metal railings from rust
- Rebuilding a porch with appropriate documentation
- Retaining balustrades; adding a secondary rail if required

- If a substantial portion of a porch or stoop is deteriorated and cannot be repaired or replicated, or if a porch is missing, creating a simplified design using stock lumber and moldings that convey visual characteristics similar to the original porch, duplicating the dimensions and materials but not necessarily all of the detailing (Refer to *Evidence of Prior Porches*, page 06-02)
- Replacement of wood steps with stone where appropriate to the building's architectural style — Typically granite

If considering the construction of a new porch or stoop, the HDC encourages:

- Locating a new porch or stoop where appropriate to the building type and where commonly found on the street
- Constructing a new porch or stoop at a historic building in a manner that does not damage, destroy, conceal or negatively affect existing historic material and features
- Constructing a new porch or stoop with the size, shape, scale, massing, form, materials, and color of the historic design and its appropriateness to the house and streetscape
- Constructing additions with porches that are simple in design and relate to the existing building
- Keeping in mind that side and rear elevation porches are typically simpler in design than front elevation porches
- Constructing a porch or a stoop on a new building that visually relates to the proposed building in a manner similar to historic porches on neighboring buildings
- Most porch floors at wood-framed buildings were historically made of wood; stone or brick porch floors are appropriate only on masonry buildings

The HDC discourages:

- Removing historic porches and stoops
- Enclosing a porch visible from the public right-of-way
- Replacing wood or masonry steps with concrete
- Using "natural" or stained wood at porches or stoops; this is generally not appropriate on a historic building
- Installing a PVC or other synthetic railing system at any porch or stoop location, with the exception of metal railings at masonry stoops
- Installing synthetic flooring material at any location that is visible from the public right-of-way

Decks

If considering a garden deck, the HDC encourages:

- Locating decks to limit visibility from the right-of-way
- Installing a deck in a manner that does not require the removal of historic building features such as porches and stoops, and will not damage or harm historic materials
- Minimizing the use of railings by reducing the height of the deck above the ground and installing wood railings only where required by the building code

