

TO PAINT, OR NOT TO PAINT...BRICK



You may really like the aesthetics of a painted brick house. But before you paint, there are important factors to consider.

Typically, painting your historic brick house is *not* recommended. But there are those situations where painting brick is OK.

Here are some *pros* and *cons* to help you decide. "To paint, or not to paint, that is the question."

Reasons to paint your brick:

1. **The brick has been painted before.** Most painted brick needs regular repainting, and compared to removing the old paint, it's typically the 'lesser evil'.



Look carefully at the existing brick. Exterior walls may show extensive painted areas as in the photo, or just traces of faded paint.

2. **The house was built prior to 1870, using hand-made brick.** Older brick was 'softer' and required a protective coating for an added layer to combat natural elements.
3. **The brick on the house is plain without any ornamental, decorative brickwork.** This means it's an older, softer brick that was probably meant to be painted.
4. **The masonry is in good repair.** There are no signs of chipped, deteriorating, moldy, moss-covered brick. Paint will only hide needed maintenance.
5. **The paint is compatible with the brick.** Look for paint products that have a high *permeability* rating that allows the brick to BREATHE! Waterproof sealers and coatings can trap moisture in the material and cause cracking, spalling and eventual failure.

Reasons *NOT* to paint your brick:

1. It is deteriorating and shows these signs: chipped and missing brick, mold, mildew, or growing moss. Without first determining the cause of the damage, paint will only mask the problems, and the brick will continue to deteriorate and get worse over time.



2. The house was built after 1870 when the use of machine-made brick was prevalent. Materials had sufficient strength without paint and had decorative applications that were meant to be seen and not camouflaged with paint.



The brick is fired and has a hard surface – more impervious to the elements

3. Your house has details such as corbelling, ‘dog-toothing’ and decorative brick applications.



This brick was not meant to be painted



- 4. Painting brick becomes long-term maintenance.** As with any painted surface, once brick is painted, it will likely require touch ups and repainting. If you choose not to repaint, you can let the paint deteriorate naturally, but it will make your house look neglected and could hasten the deterioration of the brick.
- 5. You may be destroying a bit of your house's history.** Painting historically unpainted brick is not recommended by the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Rehabilitations. You can't easily go back to unpainted. Removing paint from masonry is difficult, time-consuming, and could end up damaging the brick.

Recommendations:

- Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration or remove heavy soiling.
- Clean masonry surfaces with the gentlest methods possible – low pressure water and detergents, using natural bristle brushes. Always test paint removers in an inconspicuous area before any large application.
- Evaluate the overall condition to determine if more significant repairs are required. Repainting may not be necessary.
- Remove damaged or deteriorated paint only to the next sound layer using the gentlest method possible (e.g., hand scraping) prior to repainting. Avoid power washing.
- Use a vapor-permeable paint that does not trap moisture but allows the brick to 'breathe'.
- Repaint with colors that are historically appropriate to the building and district.

Though a fresh new look on can add charm to your house, paint on historic brick houses is typically *not* appropriate. But it can be appropriate on houses that historically required paint to protect softer, more porous non-machine-made brick construction. Just keep in mind that painting historically unpainted brick involves intensive long-term maintenance and could potentially damage historic materials. Consider all the pros and cons before you make the decision... **to paint, or not to paint!**



Questions? Call or email the Columbus Landmarks Home Preservation Program: 614-221-4508 / skeeney@columbuslandmarks.org

For more information: <https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/rehabilitation/rehab/masonry01.htm>
http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/standguide/rehab/rehab_index.htm