

# District of Columbia Historic Preservation Guidelines

## LANDSCAPING, LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND SECONDARY BUILDINGS IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS



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# Introduction

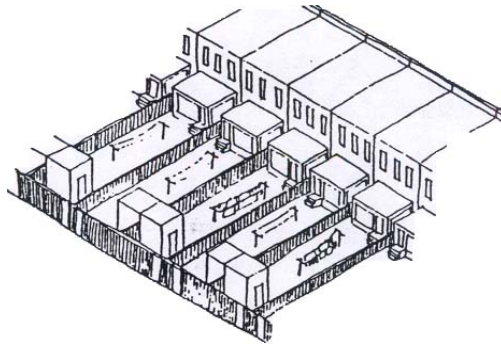
Trees, shrubs, flowers and lawns, and landscape features such as paths, decks, patios, driveways, walls, fences and the like often significantly contribute to the character of a historic building and its neighborhood. Garages, sheds and other secondary buildings also may contribute to the character of a historic building and its neighborhood. Traditionally, landscaping, landscape features, and secondary buildings were designed as part of an ensemble along with the main building. This was particularly true of large free-standing residential buildings on large lots. Sometimes the landscape and its features were used to enhance a particular view to or from the main building, or to screen the main building from view.

Today most existing historic landscapes, their features and secondary buildings are found in residential areas, although some are associated with embassies, government, commercial and other types of buildings. The design of landscaping, landscape features and secondary buildings has evolved over the past 200 years. During the first half of the nineteenth century, landscape commonly used native flowers, shrubs and ornamental trees. The plantings were located to add depth to views to and from the main building. When possible, boundary lines were thickly planted to separate a property from its neighbors.

In the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, the Victorian Garden landscape style became popular. It emphasized informal, or natural, forms and groupings of plant materials. The front yard was separated from the street and public sidewalk by low stone or brick walls or by decorative cast iron fences. Shrubs, trees and flower beds ran along side boundary lines. Cast stone, concrete and cast iron lawn ornaments and statues were popular features in yards. Shrubs and densely planted flowerbeds were planted close to the house to hide building foundations.<sup>(1)</sup> In contrast to the almost exclusive use of native plants prior to the 1850s, the Victorian Garden often contained exotic plant materials imported from Europe, Asia, South America and from other regions of the United States.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the design of rear yards was usually far more utilitarian than the design of front yards. This was particularly true of rear yards of rowhouses. Shrubs, trees, flowers or fences were used to separate neighboring yards. A carriage house or stable, accessed from an alley, may have been located at the rear of the property. A path, leading from the alley to the house, allowed coal to be delivered and provided access to the carriage house or stable. The largest portion of the rear yard, particularly the rear yards of rowhouses, was devoted to an open area to dry clothes or other utilitarian functions.

**1) Landscaping used to hide building foundations is known as foundation planting.**



**The rear yards of late nineteenth century rowhouses were often used to dry laundry or store coal.**

Early twentieth century residential landscapes often consisted of isolated trees and foundation plantings of flowers and shrubs. Concrete sidewalks led directly from the street or public sidewalk to the front door of the house. low shrubs, wooden fences, or brick or stone retaining walls, separated the front yard from the street. Rear yards were often enclosed with wood fences and contained garages accessed from alleys.

The design of early twentieth century landscapes was influenced by the design of the main building. For example, free-standing buildings designed in the Colonial Revival style often featured front yards with a boxwood lined path and symmetrically placed trees. Rear yards sometimes featured small-scale formal gardens inspired by Colonial period design.

Landscaping associated with modest buildings during the early twentieth century, such as rowhouses, were usually de-signed to be simple and utilitarian. Front yards were often planted in grass with some foundation plantings. The front yard may have been separated from the public sidewalk by a cast iron fence or low retaining wall of stone. The rear yards of rowhouses continued to be utilitarian in nature, often featuring a garage opening onto an alley. The common height, materials and design of garages, as well as the rhythm of the garage doors, contributed to the character of the alley.



**In the early twentieth century, alleys were often lined with character-defining garages.**

# Design of Landscaping , Landscape Features and Secondary Buildings

There are a number of design issues related to historic landscaping, landscape features and secondary buildings. Existing landscaping and landscape features in front and rear yards such as sidewalks and paths, driveways and curbscuts, walls and fences, or patios and decks, may have been altered or removed. New landscaping and landscape features may have been added. Similarly, existing secondary buildings such as garages and sheds may have been altered, removed or added. In addition, any proposed changes to historic landscapes, landscape features and secondary buildings should consider the affect of the change on the character of the existing main building, its property and on the neighborhood.

## Landscapes in Front Yards

The design of front yards is one of the most important character-defining features of historic buildings, particularly free-standing residential buildings and rowhouses. The front yard establishes the context for a building and helps to relate it to its neighbors through the use of common design and plant materials. The care and attention shown in a front yard also shows the pride an owner has in the property and the neighborhood.

In many, but not all, areas of the city, front yards are private property. Thus the design of the landscaping is largely under the control of the property owner. Typically, the landscaping should be compatible with the design of the main building and any secondary buildings on the property that can be seen from the street, as well as with the design of surrounding properties.

In some areas of the District of Columbia, however, front yards are actually located on public property. This is particularly true of historic rowhouse districts with the notable exception of Georgetown. This unique arrangement is due to the city's eighteenth century design envisioned by Pierre L'Enfant and its subsequent development in the nineteenth century. When L'Enfant planned Washington, he envisioned a great city filled with commerce, industry, embassies and grand buildings. Its hierarchical grid street pattern overlaid with diagonal avenues reflected his belief that Washington would one day be a major cosmopolitan city. Many of the streets and avenues were designed in the then newly developed concept of the grand boulevard, with rows of trees lining gravel paths and carriage lanes. Some streets, such as East Capital Street, were designed to be 160 feet wide.



**The Parking Act allowed owners of property fronting certain wide streets to use portions of the public right-of-way as their front yard.**

By the 1860s however, it became clear that the extreme width of many of L'Enfant's rights-of-way were excessive for the scale of the buildings that lined the streets, as well as for the amount of traffic on the avenues. In response to this reality, Congress passed the *Parking Act* in 1870, and in 1871 the *Projection Act*. Both *Acts* allowed for the private use, with certain restrictions, of public space in front of buildings on exceptionally wide streets.

Although named the Parking Act, the legislation had nothing to do with parking automobiles. Rather, it refers to maintaining a park-like environment in the public space while allowing property owners to fence the area and treat it as their front yards. The Projection Act allowed the front facades of buildings along the same wide streets to contain porches, bays, towers and turrets that projected over the property line and into the right-of-way.

In many of the city's rowhouse neighborhoods the private use of public space extends 14 to 18 feet over the property line, which is typically where the front facade is located. In other areas, private use of public space may extend as far as 40 feet in front of the property line. To retain the park-like appearance envisioned in the 1870 Act, landscaping is restricted to flowers, ground cover, grass, low shrubs and trees. Vegetable gardens, shrubs and hedges over three feet high and substantial paving of green space is not allowed. Only short, open fencing is allowed.

## Landscape Features

Sidewalks, paths, driveways, curb cuts, fences, retaining walls, decks and patios are some of the more common landscape features found in Washington's historic districts. When located in front yards or other areas that can be seen from public right-of-way, their design often contribute to the character of the property and neighborhood.

### Sidewalks and Paths

The design and location of sidewalks and paths located in front yards helps to define the character of the landscape and the neighborhood. Historically they were constructed of concrete, although other materials can be found. Often sidewalks and paths were constructed at the same time as the main building. Others were added over the years, sometimes using inappropriate materials such as brick or flagstone. If the sidewalk or path is located in a front yard subject to the Parking Act, the materials must be impermeable. Thus gravel or other non-impermeable surface materials may not be used. In most cases, the path leading from the public sidewalk to the front porch, steps or door runs in a straight line. In other cases, the front path is curved to complement a semicircular driveway.

## Driveways and Curb Cuts

The design, materials and placement of driveways contribute to the character of a property and its neighborhood. Existing driveways in historic districts may be paved in a variety of materials, such as asphalt, smooth concrete, and in certain areas, gravel. Traditionally, cobblestone, brick, stone, patterned or textured concrete and the like, were not used for driveways in the city's historic districts. Where permitted in front yards, driveways typically lead straight from the street to a garage in the rear yard; or they are semicircular in design, leading to the front door of a building. Typically, the latter design is associated with large free-standing residential buildings, apartments, embassies, government buildings and the like. In historic districts consisting primarily of rowhouses, driveways are not permitted in front yards. In these cases, garages or parking spaces are usually located in the rear yard immediately adjacent to an alley.

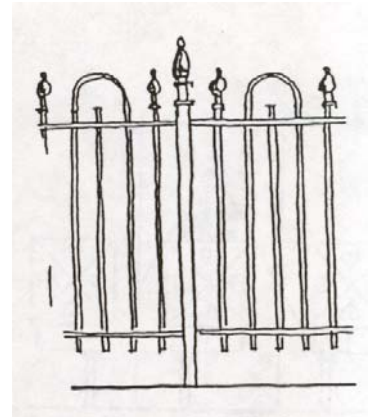
The placement, width, design and materials of curbs cuts are regulated by code. Any changes to existing curb cuts or the addition of new ones must be approved by the District of Columbia's Building Permit Office.

## Fences and Retaining Walls

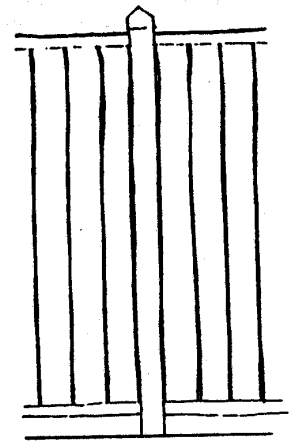
Fences in front yards are used to define property lines and create a sense of enclosure, as well as contribute to the character of landscapes and neighborhoods. Typically made of cast iron, open fences are almost always used to create a separation between the public sidewalk and the front yard. The height of front yard fences (3'-6" maximum), their openness and materials are regulated by District of Columbia building codes. Any changes to existing fences or the addition of new fences requires a building permit.

Fences in rear yards are used to define property lines and, in most cases, to provide privacy. Thus they are typically solid and higher than fences located in front yards. The design, materials and height (7'-0" maximum) of fences located in rear yards are also regulated by District of Columbia building codes.

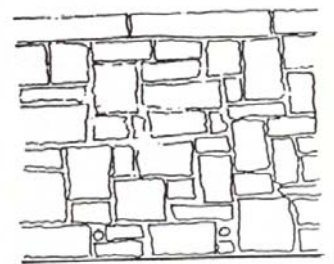
Almost all walls located in front or rear yards in historic districts are retaining walls. As such they significantly contribute to the character of the property and its neighborhood. Typically retaining walls are constructed of stone, although some brick and cast concrete walls can be found. In addition to the material used, the profile of the mortar joints and the type of coursing contributes to the character of the wall.<sup>(2)</sup> The design, placement, and materials of new retaining walls or changes to existing ones requires a building permit.



**Fences in front yards should be open in design.**

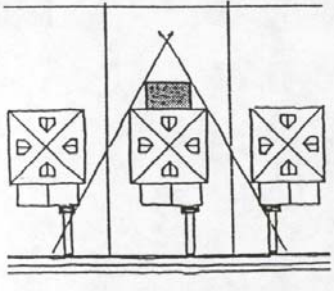


**Fences in rear yards are often solid in design.**



**Retaining walls are important character-defining features of landscapes and neighborhoods.**

**2) For more information on wall materials, see *Walls and Foundations of Historic Buildings*.**



**A deck or patio should be located so that it can not be seen from a public street or sidewalk.**

## **Decks and Patios**

Most decks and patios located in Washington's historic districts are not original. Rather they were added after World War II when outdoor living became popular. In most cases they are located in rear yards, although some can be found in side yards of free-standing residential buildings. Rarely do existing decks or patios contribute to the character of a property or its neighborhood. In many cases their design and materials are not compatible with the existing building and the design of the landscape. Thus changes to existing decks and patios are almost always appropriate so long as the design of the alteration is compatible with the historic building and landscape. If a new deck or patio is to be added it should be located in the rear yard and designed to be compatible with the building and landscaping if it can be seen from the public street or alley. In some areas, such as front yards affected by the Parking Act, locating a deck or patio in the front yard is not permitted.

## **Garages, Sheds, and Other Secondary Buildings**

The most common historic secondary buildings in Washington are garages and sheds, although others, used originally as dwellings, can also be found. Often located in rear yards and fronting on an alley, existing garages were designed to be compatible with the main building, although usually employing less ornate detailing and architectural features. Typically, garages, in particular the rhythm of their doors, define the character of an alley as well as contribute to the character of the property. Sheds are also usually located in rear yards, often hidden from view behind high, solid fences. Changes to existing secondary buildings, or the design of new ones that can be seen from the public street or alley should be compatible with the design of the existing building, its landscape and the neighborhood.

## Removing, Altering or Adding Landscaping and Landscape Features

Character-defining landscaping and landscape features such as front yards, sidewalks, driveways, fences and the like should not be removed or altered without careful consideration. Adding new landscaping or landscape features should only be undertaken after careful consideration and consultation. While landscaping, and some landscape features, are not regulated by the Historic Preservation staff the office should nonetheless be consulted prior to undertaking any changes or additions.

The design of front yards, their materials and features, establishes the immediate context for the main building and often relates the building and its property to the neighborhood. This is particularly true in rowhouse neighborhoods governed by the Parking Act and other residential areas built over a short period of time. If a property owner determines that it is appropriate or necessary to alter the existing landscaping, he or she should consider the affect that removing existing or adding new plantings will have on the character of the main building and neighborhood. In selecting new plant materials, consideration should be given to the affect of both the new and mature plantings on the property. Consulting local landscape architects or nurseries on the design of alterations to the existing landscapes as well as for appropriate plant materials should always be considered.

Existing sidewalks and paths should be maintained and, if necessary, repaired or replaced in-kind, that is in the same material as the existing. This is particularly important for sidewalks and paths located in front yards or in areas that can be seen from a public street. If new sidewalks or paths are added, they should be located and constructed of materials that are compatible with the historic building, its property and the neighborhood.

Most of the city's historic districts were developed before the widespread use of automobiles. Thus, driveways located in front yards are not common, allowing green space to flow uninterrupted from one end of the street to the other. Further, the lack of driveways eliminates potential conflict between pedestrians and automobiles as well as frequent curb cuts. Adding a new driveway or parking area to a front yard or area of the property that can be seen from a public right-of-way is rarely appropriate, as it will significantly alter the setting of the main building. On the other hand, locating a new drive or parking area in the rear yard or another area of the property that cannot be seen from a public right-of-way will usually not detract from the landscape or the building. In either case, the new driveway or parking area must still conform to the District of Columbia's building and zoning codes.



Existing fences and retaining walls that contribute to the appearance of historic buildings, their landscapes and neighborhoods should be maintained and if necessary, repaired or replaced in-kind. If a fence or retaining wall has been removed, it should be replaced using documentary, photographic or other evidence. If a property is missing its historic fence or retaining wall, a neighboring property with existing original fences or walls may be used as the basis for the design of the replacement.

New or replacement fences and walls must comply with District of Columbia building codes related to their location, height, openness and other design attributes. In front yards, metal picket-type fences found in a number of styles are often appropriate in historic districts. On the other hand, chain link, split rail, stockade and other similarly designed fences are not appropriate. In rear yards, vertical board, board-on-board and board-and-batten fences are appropriate.

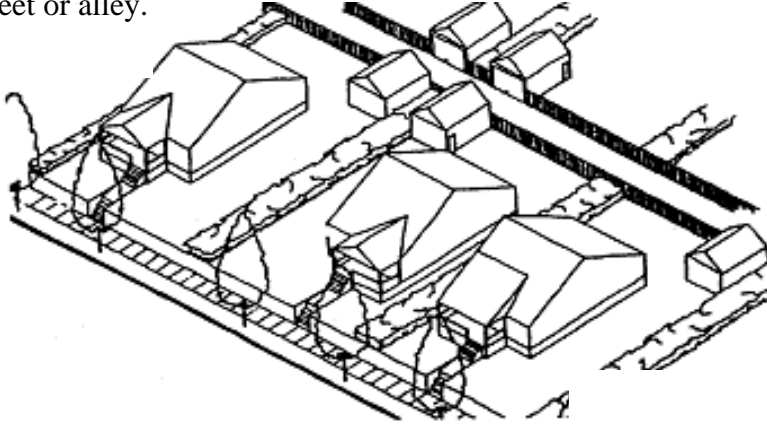
The design and materials of replacement retaining walls should be based on existing walls on the property, in the neighborhood or on documentary or photographic evidence. Particular attention should be paid to the coursing and to the profile and width of mortar joints. New retaining walls should be compatible with the design of the main building, the property's landscaping and the neighborhood. However since adding new retaining walls to historic property is almost never appropriate, they should not be undertaken without early involvement of the Historic Preservation Office.

## **Removing, Altering or Adding Secondary Buildings**

Garages, sheds and other secondary buildings were often constructed at the same time as the main building. Typically, secondary buildings were designed to be part of an ensemble, along with the main building, landscaping and landscape features. Sometimes, existing secondary buildings have been altered as new uses, such as garages for automobiles, created a need. In other cases, new secondary buildings have been constructed or original ones removed as their use was no longer required.

Removing an original secondary building or one that was added at a later date should only be done after careful consideration and consultation with the Historic Preservation Office. This is particularly true of secondary buildings that can be seen from streets, alleys or other public rights-of-way. Altering an existing garage or shed that contributes to the character of the main building or landscape should only be done if the proposed alteration is compatible with the design, materials and other

character-defining attributes of the secondary building, main building and landscaping. Similarly, the design, location, materials and other attributes of a new garage, shed or other secondary building should be compatible with the main and other secondary buildings and the landscaping of the property. This is particularly important if the new secondary building can be seen from a public street or alley.



The design, location, materials and other features of a new secondary building should be compatible with existing buildings.

## Discovering Archeological Materials

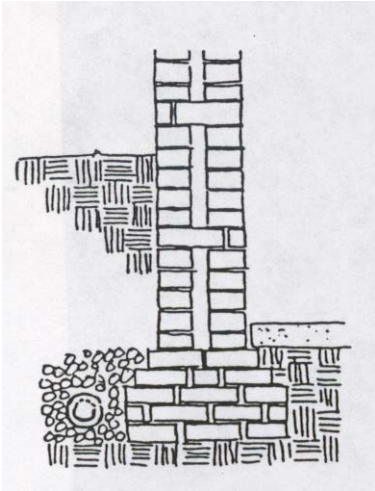
Archeological materials consist of a variety of objects from foundations and cisterns to ceramics and tools. They are important because they often yield information about past human activity on a property. Archeological materials may have been buried in the yard for years or even centuries only to come to light during construction activity or, sometimes, because of soil erosion. In other cases, archeological material may be hidden in walls, joist spaces or other building cavities opened during rehabilitation or other construction projects. In Washington, as in most metropolitan areas, properly recording and preserving archeological materials is important because so much physical information about the past has been lost through continual building and rebuilding.

If archeological materials are discovered during a construction project the property owner should contact the Historic Preservation Office to discuss an appropriate course of action. In some cases, the staff archeologist will visit the construction site to determine the importance of the material or to suggest that documentation, additional excavation or other actions be taken to record and preserve the material. While it is not a requirement that this consultation must be undertaken, it is always a good idea so that potentially important material is not destroyed and the property owner can gain additional information about his or her building and property.

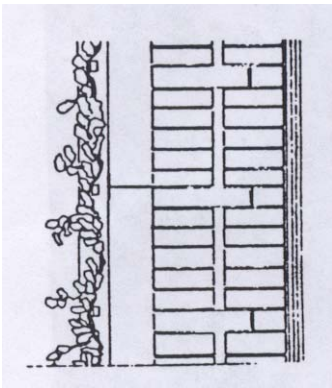


The Historic Preservation Division's publication, "How to Report an Archeological Site," can tell you more about archeology.

## Maintaining the Landscape



**Roots can clog French drains contributing to wet basements and crawl spaces.**



**Vines and ivy should not be allowed to grow directly on walls of historic buildings. Rather, if appropriate to the design of the house, they should be trained on the trellises located in front of walls.**

Maintaining the landscape is important to retaining the character of historic properties and districts. Engaging in regular maintenance activities, such as pruning trees, trimming hedges, replanting annuals, raking, weeding and cutting the lawn helps to insure that the setting of the building is preserved. Just as important, engaging in regular maintenance of landscaping helps to ensure that trees, shrubs, vines and other plantings do not cause building maintenance and repair problems. For example, some plant materials can cause maintenance and repair problems if they are allowed to grow on or near walls, foundations, roofs or underground utilities.

Foundation plantings can contribute to wet basements or crawl spaces. Roots may clog French drains or underground pipes attached to down spouts. Shrubs and other foundation plantings can contribute to wet basements and crawl spaces by shading the ground, slowing its drying after rain or snow. Homeowners may also unwittingly increase the probability of wet basements in the summer by over-watering foundation plantings. The lack of a waterproof membrane, cracks in basement walls or foundations, deteriorated gutters and down spouts, or clogged French-drains can also contribute to a wet basement or crawl space.

The roots of large trees located near a building may cause foundations or basement walls to crack or heave, particularly if the building was constructed before the tree became mature. In most cases the cracks and heaving will not affect the structural integrity of the building, but may contribute to a wet basement and uneven floors.

Vines and ivy are often allowed to grow on stone, brick and wood walls. While the vegetation may add charm to the building, their roots will accelerate the deterioration of the wall by trapping moisture, increasing the probability that stone and brick will spall, mortar will deteriorate, paint will peel and wood rot. In addition, vines and ivy provide shelter for insects and even small animals that cause deterioration of walls. Vines and ivy should not be allowed to grow directly on exterior walls; rather they should be trained on trellises mounted in front of, but not directly attached to, the walls.

Trees that shade roofs, particularly roofs with low pitches or slopes, may promote the growth of moss, lichen or other plant materials. The plants in turn will trap moisture against the roof membrane.<sup>(4)</sup> Overhanging tree limbs may also promote the growth of plant materials in gutters, particularly if they are not cleaned on a regular basis. If the moss or lichens are particularly heavy or the plants typically grow in gutters, the plants should be removed and overhanging tree limbs trimmed.

# Repairing and Replacing Landscape Features and Secondary Buildings

Repairing landscape features, such as sidewalks and paths, driveways and curb cuts, fences and walls, patios and decks is important to maintaining the character of a property. Similarly, repairing existing secondary buildings such as garages and sheds is important to maintaining the character of historic properties and their landscapes.

Landscape features and secondary buildings are constructed of a variety of materials including wood, stone, brick, concrete and metal. Each material is subject to deterioration caused by the weather, insects, plant materials and other factors. Each will deteriorate at a different rate and has appropriate and inappropriate methods of repair that are discussed in detail in other booklets in this series (5).

## Wood

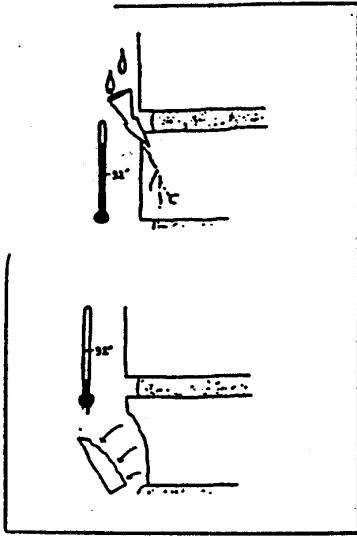
Wood is almost always painted to protect it from the weather. Wood is subject to rot and insect infestation. Paint is subject to blistering, peeling, cracking and fading. Minor rot or insect infestation can be repaired by consolidating the affected area with epoxy or another appropriate consolidant after properly drying and treating the wood. If the damage is more extensive, the affected area should be replaced in-kind, that is using the same species of wood, finished and profiled to match the existing.

Blistered, cracking, flaked or peeled paint should be removed by hand-sanding prior to repainting. Heavily encrusted paint that obscures details and profiles may be stripped to the bare wood using appropriate chemical strippers. Power sanding, heat guns, sandblasting and other methods of removing paint that are likely to damage the wood, its details and profiles, should not be employed. After the surface has been properly prepared, the wood should be repainted in appropriate colors.

## Brick and Stone

Brick and stone are used for many landscape features and secondary buildings including sidewalks, paths, steps, retaining walls, patios and garages. While brick and stone require very little maintenance and repair, they are subject to spalling and may lean or crack. The mortar used to bind together brick or stone is subject to deterioration.

**5) For more detailed discussion of causes of deterioration and appropriate methods of repair, see *Roofs on Historic Buildings, Windows and Doors for Historic Buildings, and Walls and Foundations of Historic Buildings.***



**Spalling occurs when water freezes behind brick and stone surfaces.**

Spalling occurs when moisture penetrates behind the surface of brick and stone. In cold temperatures the water freezes and expands, causing the outer surface to break away. Lightly spalled stone may be patched with a cement-based patching compound, colored to match the existing stone as closely as possible. Heavily spalled stone, spalled stone steps and spalled brick should be replaced in-kind.

Stone retaining walls may lean or crack due to poor original design, compacting of the earth behind the wall, clogging of drain tiles or other reasons. Retaining walls with pronounced leans or cracks should be disassembled and rebuilt with the same stones used to face a new back-up wall of concrete block or poured concrete. If replacement stone is necessary, it should match the existing in size, color, profile and other distinguishing features. New mortar joints should also match the existing in size, color and profile. Clogged drains should be opened if possible; or if not, they should be replaced.

The mortar used in brick and stone steps, landscaping features and secondary buildings may deteriorate over time. When mortar joints become recessed 1/2" or more behind the original face, the joints should be repointed. (6) Repointing requires that all loose mortar be removed by hand and new mortar, chemically compatible with the existing mortar and surrounding materials, be inserted into the joint. The mortar joint should be profiled to resemble the existing. Using power tools to cut old mortar from joints will damage surrounding stone and thus should never be used. Using new mortar that is harder than the existing can cause the surface of brick or stone to spall.

## **Concrete**

Concrete is often used for sidewalks, steps and sometimes patios. It is subject to spalling, powdering, cracking, settling and heaving. Concrete spalling or powdering is typically caused by a poor initial mixture or by salt or chemicals used to de-ice sidewalks and steps. Cracking, settling and heaving of concrete may be the result of tree roots, freezing temperatures, loss of ground water or other reasons.

Spalled and powdered concrete should be removed and replaced with new concrete, colored and finished to match the existing. Badly cracked, settled or heaved concrete may also require removal and replacement. In some cases, minor cracking can be successfully patched using patching cement. Concrete slabs that show minor heaving or settlement often can be lifted intact and relaid on a new base of sand and gravel.

**6) Repointing is also called tuckpointing.**

# Substitute Materials

When in-kind repair or replacement proves not to be economically or technically feasible, then a substitute material may be considered. When a substitute material is selected, particular attention should be paid to the material's expansion, contraction and weathering properties as well as to its chemical composition. Installing a substitute material with very different expansion and contraction rates from that of the existing may cause joints between the new and existing materials to open. Materials also weather or age at different rates, changing appearance over time. When a substitute material is considered, its weathering properties should be similar to those of the existing. In addition the finished appearance of the substitute material should match the existing material in color, profile, texture and other important characteristics as closely as possible.

The following substitute materials may be suitable for replacing historic landscape features and secondary buildings. If the feature or secondary building is visible from a public street or alley, and significantly contributes to the overall character of the property, extra care must be taken in selecting compatible substitute materials. Before proceeding with the selection of any substitute material, the homeowner should consult with the Historic Preservation Division.

## Substitute Materials

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### Historic Material

### Substitute Material

*If the landscape feature or secondary building is visible from a public street or alley.*

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| - Stone | - Cast stone<br>- GFRC (Glass fiber reinforced concrete) |
|---------|--|

*If the landscape feature or secondary building is not visible from a public street or alley.*

- |         |                        |
|---------|------------------------|
| - Brick | - Concrete<br>- Stucco |
|---------|------------------------|

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| - Stone | - Concrete<br>- GRFC<br>- Stucco<br>- Concrete block |
|---------|--|

The *District of Columbia Historic Preservation Guidelines* were developed under a grant from the Historic Preservation Division, Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, Government of the District of Columbia. They were funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service. The United States Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, or handicap. If you believe that you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility in this program, or if you desire further information please write to: Director, Office of Equal Opportunity, National Capital Region, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1100 Ohio Drive, S. W., Washington, D.C. 20242, (202) 619-7020. AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER M/F/H.

(updated: 3/31/2010)