

Restoring historic windows

Keeping the details of a historic home

BY LAURI KRAMER SERAFIN

As the weather improves, it's time to consider window restoration.

Windows are one of the most important character defining elements of a structure. In my opinion, they should not be removed or replaced. I would not consider buying an old house without its original windows. The wavy glass only adds to their charm. I hope to encourage historic window preservation and to provide resources. If I can do it, so can you.

Restoration and repair of wood windows isn't too difficult. They were made to be maintained. Broken parts can be remade and even whole sashes can be replicated. I first learned about window restoration from the 1980s Old House Journal newsletter. I am not a window professional, but I have performed window repair and maintenance with good results. Glazing windows is a skill that's learned in time. My husband has fiberglass and epoxy experience and has had success repairing damage with a two part epoxy filler.

Before thinking about replacement windows, first consider materials. Older windows were often built with high quality, old growth lumber, while replacement windows have a limited life span. Older windows were made of easily assembled parts and can last for centuries. Maintenance generally involves painting and occasional reglazing.

Older windows have also already made use of natural materials. They should not be placed in a landfill for new wood or vinyl windows with a short life expectancy. In turn, those will need to be replaced again. And once thrown away, these old windows are lost forever.

Resources for window preservation

- Lower Columbia Preservation Society. A local resource that provides window projects, links to Clatsop Community College historic preservation classes and other library resources. It also provides detail about Astoria Historic Landmark Commission recommendations and provides links to the city's building code. This is very important for owners of historic landmark homes or those in dedicated historic districts.

- The Craftsman Blog. An informative blog from Scott Sidler with tutorials and an excellent course on windows for purchase.

- 'True Tales from Old Houses.' A podcast from Stacy Grinsfelder, promoting window preservation with a strong do it yourself work ethic.

- Historic HomeWorks. A resource for home owners and professionals to maintain historic buildings, especially the wood epoxy repair discussion and video.

Also consider energy efficiency. Old windows can be very efficient when kept in good repair, or with the use of interior or exterior storm windows. We have many interior storm windows installed by previous owners to increase energy efficiency. I am removing them slowly as I work on my original windows to keep them from leaking. I do not care for the look of interior storm windows, especially in the public rooms of the Forsstrom House.

This leads to a consideration for aesthetics, which lead to higher property values. Newer windows do not often have the correct aesthetic for an older home. Historic homes with original windows have also been demon-



Photos by Lauri Kramer Serafin

Three casement windows in the first floor library of the Forsstrom House, topped with a stationary leaded prism window. Exterior storms were also installed recently.

strated to have higher property values and increased curb appeal, so consider using original windows as investment preservation. I inspect our windows annually to determine those that are the highest priority for restoration. There was much deferred maintenance on our windows in the past. Luckily, their materials are of high quality and are repairable. My husband and I work on windows in the summer, removing paint layers, sanding and painting.

Most of my 72 windows are wood casement windows. These are relatively simple to work on with few moving parts. We have four double hung windows and we restored one of them last year. For me, it was a needed review of the double hung sash window anatomy. When window repair is beyond my skill set, our carpenter steps in. Often, he has the exact tool I need to make the job easier. I use a window restoration craftsman to make replacement sash or pieces.

Annually, I select a few exterior windows for traditional wood and glass storm windows. These are the correct vintage look for the home. The highest priority windows in the house were those with leaded prism glass, along with those facing south and west. These get the brunt of the weather and are the best candidates for preservation.



The top window of an 1894 double hung sash window in the pantry of the Forsstrom House.

I do the measurements and have them custom made. They're fitted, primed and painted to get ready for hanging. They can be heavy and challenging, scaffolding and extra hands make installation much easier.

Lauri Kramer Serafin is the owner of the Forsstrom House in Astoria's Shively-McClure Historic District. For more about her restoration work, contact forsstromhouse@gmail.com or visit theforsstromhouse.com.

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