

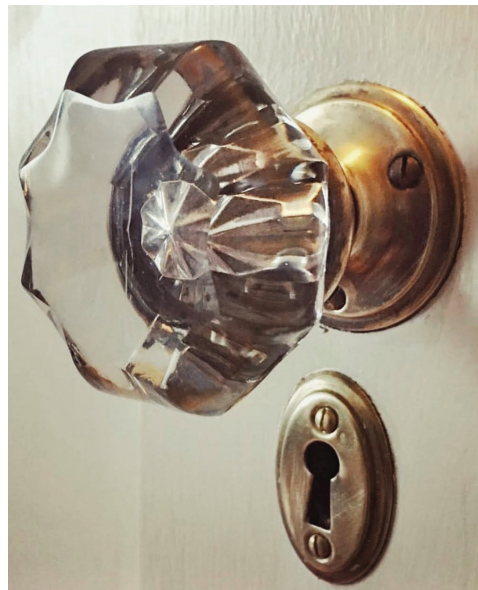


Photos by Lauri Kramer Serafin

Opaque glass knobs in blue, like this one, are a rare find.



An antique doorknob made with brass and nickel plating, seen in a second-floor bathroom in the Forsstrom House.



An octagon doorknob made of crystal and brass hardware, typical of the second floor of the Forsstrom House.



Interior door hardware made of nickel-plated brass, with a skeleton key, shown at the Forsstrom House in Astoria.

Antique doorknob choices

Finding vintage features to fill in charming details

BY LAURI KRAMER SERAFIN

Antique doorknobs are a strong interior design statement for an old house, especially at the front door. Unfortunately, it is common for original hardware to be lost to breakage and replacement. To understand what door hardware to choose, it's helpful to know the history of door hardware.

Wooden door latches and knobs were common until the early 19th century. A large number of patents for doorknobs were granted between 1830 and 1873. Cast metal doorknobs became available around 1846.

There was soon an explosion of matching hardware suites of bronze, brass and iron marketed throughout the Victorian era.

After 1915, doorknobs made of pressed glass were widely manufactured and popular. Crystal, a type of glass that contains lead and has brilliant reflective luster, was uncommon and expensive, as was cut glass.

Most glass and crystal knobs were clear, but colorful styles were also made. White milk glass was used in the white sanitary bathrooms of the early 20th century. These inexpensive porcelain knobs, often in black or white, were very common.

Antique and vintage door fixtures are often mortice locks. These locks are installed into a rectangular recess in the body of a door. This differs from the "rim lock" door hardware directly applied to the door face. A spindle that attaches the doorknobs goes through a hole in the installed lock mechanism.

A cover plate may lay over the entire doorknob attachment and key hole. Alternately, in separate pieces, a doorknob rosette and escutcheon or keyhole cover may do the trick. Nickel plating was once customary for door hardware throughout bathrooms and kitchens. Chrome became more prevalent after the mid-1930s.

Prior to selecting doorknobs, assess what is present and original. Consult with someone experienced in selecting vintage hardware if possible. Also note that exterior doorknobs and lock sets are often larger

than interior ones. Door knobs are a decorative statement and are easy to upgrade, but do save and label original hardware.

Remember, the rule of old house restoration or renovation is to do no harm. It may be preferable to swap locations of original hardware for better visual impact.

When we bought the Forsstrom House, I found many original knobs and hardware. The 1894 first floor had plain cast brass and nickel-plated brass door knobs, while the 1915 second floor had lovely crystal knobs in a modified octagon shape. Nickel-plated hardware was used in the bathrooms and kitchen.

My goal was to have matching antique door hardware suites on each floor. I pulled all replacement hardware. One recommendation is to use an old closet lever or knob on the inside of a closet. This might free an original knob for a more visible place.

A day of doorknob switching moved original hardware to more visible areas of the house. A want list was carefully developed. I located matching hardware from my stash, from friends and local salvage yards.

I encourage those restoring old homes to seek out antique and vintage knobs, as most reproductions are just not the same. With a bit of effort, true-to-era fixtures can be obtained at a lower cost than reproductions.

Old paint on door hardware can be removed by putting metal hardware in a crock pot for 3 to 4 hours with two drops of dish soap. It should then peel off when done. The heat will break the weak bond between metal and paint. Finish up with fine-medium steel wool and finish with finer steel wool for a polish, then apply a clear lacquer spray if desired.

I often get questions about skeleton keys for old locks. There were once a large number of lock companies and all had a large number of proprietary key shapes. I have been collecting old furniture and door keys for decades. It's only a matter of good luck to find keys that fit. Locks can be removed from doors while shopping for old keys. It is fun to have an old lock with a key that works, one of the simple joys of living in an old house.

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.