

# NEWBURYPORT PRESERVATION TRUST

P. O. Box 184, Newburyport, MA 01950  
www.nbptpreservationtrust.org

Linking the past with the present and future



# Historic\* House Buyer's Guide

Old House Identification ~ Evidence of Quality and History ~ What to Look For and Care For

\* Historic, antique, vintage, period, or "old" homes endowed with imbedded natural resources, craftsmanship, and presence!

## Why preserve a historic home?

Newburyport's coastal location and its historic character – framed by its authentic architecture – have made the city a desirable place to visit as well as a sought-after place to live. Preserving a historic home here not only respects its history but also secures the future through its steady appreciation in value.

## What's so special about Newburyport?

Newburyport was originally the "Waterside" area of Newbury, Mass., which was settled as an agricultural enterprise by English colonists in 1635. Newburyport became a separate town in 1764, and became a city in 1851. Newburyport has one of the largest collections of well-preserved older homes in the U.S. within its 750-acre National Register Historic District.

## Why not just 'gut-and-replace'?

Gut-and-replace may seem cost effective for modern upgrades, but it can destroy the very features that add value to a home. Gut-and-replace adds to the waste stream in two ways: the Dumpster-loads of craftsmanship



in old-growth wood, and the replacement with modern materials that will follow into the landfill in a few short decades. Gut-and-replace practices are not only environmentally harmful, but also could actually decrease the value of an older home.

## What era is it?

### First Period

(1625-1725)

Characterized by a steep roof pitch, wide central chimney, one-room deep, minimal roof overhang, and asymmetrically-spaced windows.



### Georgian

(1725-1780)

Characterized by a gambrel or gabled roof, a pair of brick chimneys, center entry, two rooms deep, and symmetrically-spaced 6-over-6 windows.



### Federal

(1780-1830)

Characterized by a shallow hipped roof, pair of brick chimneys, center entry with side-lights, one/two rooms deep, frieze & cornice, and 6-over-6 windows.



### Greek Revival

(1825-1860)

Characterized by a gable-front orientation, high stone foundation, off-center entry with pediment, and heavy entablature, cornices, and pilasters.



### Victorian

(1845-1900)

Multiple formalized styles characterized by brick foundations, complex intersecting gabled roofs, turrets, towers, bay windows, and porches.



### Arts & Crafts

(1900-1930)

Characterized by gabled dormers, ample roof overhang, exposed rafter tails, sleeping porches, and built-in shelves and window seats.



# These are the signs of quality and history...

**Post & Beam Timber Frame.** Timber framing is a structurally-robust but nearly-obsolete system for building the skeleton of a house. Timber framing was used in Europe since medieval times and is the basis for the half-timbered houses in England – and the 17th-century houses in New England. In a timber-framed house, all the weight is carried by massive beams and posts; wall sheathing is just a curtain to keep out the elements. Timber framing was standard for building wooden houses in the U.S. until the mid-19th century.

**Foundations.** Stone foundations are common to historic structures, along with above-ground brick-on-stone. Watch for bulging, bowing, or shifting that could foreshadow costly repairs. For repointing foundations, use lime-based mortar that closely matches the original. Stone foundations can have long lives, and are a sign of craftsmanship that adds authenticity to your home.

**Walls: Lath and Plaster.** If you have lath and plaster, you have a historic wall worth preserving, the product of craftsmanship rarely found today. Replacing plaster walls is one of the worst mistakes made by developers. By retaining a historic plaster wall, you will have the benefits of structural integrity, insulating qualities, resistance to dampness, and soundproofing.

**Exterior Covering.** Exterior wall sheathing provides structural stability to wood framing. Installed behind clapboards or shingles, and a vapor barrier, sheathing is a third line of defense against moisture. Older homes may have wide board sheathing almost two feet wide from old growth trees. Some First Period homes have sheathing laid vertically, instead of horizontally.

**Windows.** Original windows add character to a home. Because they were made from dense, rot-resistant, old-growth wood and assembled with fine craftsmanship, they will, with proper maintenance, have a longer life-span than new windows. The proportion, shapes, and wavy glass in an older home contribute to its appeal. Through a combination of repairs and weatherstripping, older windows can be just as energy-efficient as new windows.

**Wood Flooring.** Homes of the 17th and 18th century are characterized by wide floorboards from old-growth forests. Imperfections like wear, checks, wains, splits, and nail or worm holes, all add to the character of the home and tell the story of its lived-in use. For late-19th-century Victorian homes, the best woods would be on the parlor floor, with painted poplar used for the upper floors. In more ordinary homes of the Victorian era, floors and woodwork were stained or faux-grained to resemble higher-grade woods.

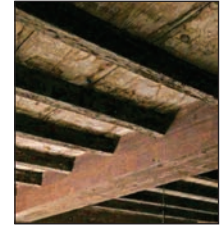
**Beams.** First Period homes are characterized by an exposed chamfered central beam called a center-girt or “summer beam” (derived from the load-bearing capacity of the *sumpter mule*), which rests on shouldered posts and supports upper floor joists.

**Original Interior Wood Features.** Look for original wood trim for evidence of quality and preservation. Doors, mantelpieces, crown moldings, window casings, baseboards, stair rails, cupboards, and paneling – crafted from tight-grained old-growth wood – are prized features that reflect the skilled hand craftsmanship of an earlier era.

## The small things to look for ...

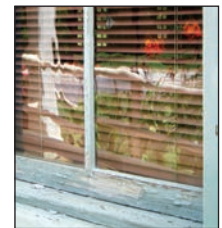
### Hatchet marks

Hatchets and hand-planing leave marks on beams that tell a story of craftsmanship. Hatchet marks were often references for the mortise-and-tenon assembly of a post-and-beam frame.



### Wavy glass

Look for the slight “wavy” distortion of original single-pane glass. Properly weatherstripped original windows – with storms – are as effective as vinyl-clad frames with cheap double-panes.



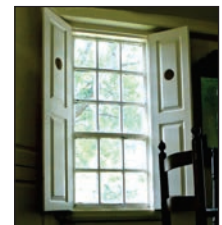
### Wide plank floors

Old-growth forests could supply plank floors of 12-inch width or greater. Imperfections of wear tell of generations of human activity. Usually the widest boards were relegated to unseen spaces.



### Inside shutters

Hinged inside shutters as well as sliding pocket shutters are increasingly rare. Other window and sash artifacts such as stop holes add character to the home and hint at its age.



### Plaster & lath

Plaster is higher quality and longer-lasting than modern drywall. In addition, plaster resists dampness and water, is easily repairable, and adds a degree of soundproofing.



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## Helpful historic house preservation resources ...

**Welcome to Newburyport!** Thanks to the rich concentration of well-preserved 18th- and 19th-century homes throughout its 750-acre National Register Historic District, the compact coastal city continues to attract those who value its historic neighborhood ambiance.



**We're here to help!** If you will be the proud steward of an older home, the Newburyport Preservation Trust (NPT), a nonprofit devoted to preservation education and advocacy, is eager to answer any questions you may have about owning and maintaining such a treasure.

Our website, [www.NbptPreservationTrust.org](http://www.NbptPreservationTrust.org), aggregates more than 6000 pages of preservation knowledge, including:

- Historic maps, books, and guides to help you research the history of your house.
- The U.S. Secretary of the Interior standards for maintaining historic properties.
- NPT's Historic House Plaque Program.
- Local preservation history. (Newburyport was not always the way it is now, and its hard-won preservation was no accident.)
- *A Measure of Change* (1975). (A must-see video for perspective on Newburyport's preservation-rooted renaissance.)

**Consultations.** Do you have a case of "Old House Puzzlement"? Contact the Newburyport Preservation Trust to arrange a consultation *before* you call for the Dumpster.

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## NPT's Historic House Plaque Program

The Newburyport Preservation Trust Historic House Plaque Program provides owners of historic homes in Newburyport the opportunity to identify their house with a plaque indicating the original owner/builder, their occupation (if known), and date. Central to the program is the verification of dates, names, and facts by experienced researchers. Stewards of Newburyport's older homes can learn the factual background of their home – and showcase their stewardship. **For complete details and application form visit [www.NbptPreservationTrust.org](http://www.NbptPreservationTrust.org).**



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