

(DON'T) HIT THE BRICKS: CARING FOR HISTORIC MASONRY

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Something about bricks and stone fascinates me. Masonry offers seemingly limitless variations of textures, patterns, and colors, and these variations are crucial character-defining elements of a historic masonry structure. In order to preserve that character, though, you have to preserve your masonry. That's not as easy as it might seem. For all its perceived durability, historic masonry is vulnerable to the elements like any other building material. It's also not impervious to the bad judgment of humankind, so learn to treat it right. Good intentions have been the ruin of many a historic brick! Obviously, you can't learn everything there is to know about historic masonry in 2000 words or less, so consider this article the *Cliff Notes* version of what you as a commission member should know about the identification, care, and repair of historic masonry.

Identification

Bricks are easy to identify. Even though they can vary greatly in size and appearance, most of us can pick a brick structure out of a lineup. Whether hand-molded or extruded, bricks all look pretty much the same. Then there's stone, which is easy enough to identify as stone, but can you tell the difference between sandstone and limestone? How about granite or marble? Or cast stone, which isn't stone at all but concrete? It's important to learn what material you're dealing with before you make any decisions about how to treat it. For example, you don't want to use an acidic cleaner on marble or limestone, or you may etch it. Consulting with a professional geologist provides the most definitive answer; he or she may even be able to tell you what quarry or clay bank originally provided your materials.

Looking for trouble

Moisture is historic masonry's biggest enemy (people are a close second). Water infiltration, combined with repeated freeze/thaw cycles, causes severe deterioration of masonry and mortar. The areas most likely to deteriorate are those most exposed: look first to sills, foundations, chim-

neys, lower walls, and stairways. A heavy rain offers the best circumstances for you to evaluate potential problem areas on a historic structure. In order to find out what kind of damage water might be doing, you first have to know where it's coming from and where it's going. Take an umbrella and walk around the next time it rains—you may be surprised by what you see. Is an abnormally large proportion of water running down a particular corner of the structure? Check to see if you have mortar loss or deteriorated bricks in that area. Is water hitting the ground and splashing back onto the foundation? Check for deterioration there, as well. Is the water pooling at the foundation and not draining properly? If so, you may find yourself dealing with rising damp, which is what happens when porous masonry wicks water upward, where it can stay inside your walls and freeze.



There are several signs of trouble here. Note the algae and staining, indicating that moisture splashing onto the wall is not evaporating. The dark bricks are those on which the painted fronts have spalled off, leaving the inner, softer core of brick exposed. Rising damp is causing the paint to flake off in multiple places—see the clear line of demarcation between damp and dry exhibited by flaking vs. well-adhered paint. Photo courtesy of: Mantero Consulting Group